

A large, muscular, golden-yellow hand, resembling a giant ape or a powerful superhero, is shown from the wrist up. The hand is holding a small, white, winged figure, possibly a cherub or a small angel, in its palm. The figure is wearing a white tunic and has small white wings. The background is plain white.

JASON
KOROL

THE
UNDEFEATED

THE UNDEFEATED

JASON KOROL

MARTIAL WAY PRESS

To B...and all that potential. There was a day I'll never forget, warm and by the gardens, when you were looking at me with all that sadness. And there was another, in December, after I rode all night, and you sat alone on the step. Here's the story I was writing...I just didn't know it yet.

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“...because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets - before the silver cord is snapped or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it...all is vanity.”

“...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

THE UNDEFEATED

Jason Korol

CHAPTER 1

IF YOU'VE EVER TRIED to take a photo of a sunset, way up in the mountains, with a nearly endless view, and realized you need not just any camera, but a professional one, but you have something cheap, then you can understand my dilemma. Writing about the most beautiful woman in the world, as Samantha certainly is, requires a Shakespeare or a Hugo. Obviously, I'm neither of those men - and for that I do sincerely apologize but you're stuck with me for the simplest of reasons: I alone know the story. That ought to account for something at least. I can imagine that no photographer has ever taken a photo of nature, in all its splendor and glory, and felt satisfied that he's come close to capturing the enormity of it all. It's the same with writing about her.

Also, given the sorry state to which our once rich land has descended, with the accompanying dearth of entertainments, it's to my advantage that reading is probably the one activity the inhabitants of our depleted land can still afford. This is, to some extent, a story of that descent, though a personal one quite unique in nature. My

tale, however, isn't so much about that as it is about Samantha, whom I see incessantly in my mind's eye, forever dancing in the hallowed Gulf moonlight, singing along innocently with her songs, and simply being the loveliest creature God ever placed under the sun. This is, with all else considered, her story because I can't help but write about her. And it's about the loves we have had and how they change us - especially the ones we've lost. If that makes me somewhat pathetic, then I suppose that's the case and there's nothing at all to be done about it. Yes, yes, that's all well and good. It's never been a secret that I'm, well, not like my brother but, then again, no one else is either - he being the world's greatest fighter. More to the point, though, I'm certainly alright being the hopeless romantic...with a heavy emphasis upon the hopeless part. I won't make apologies for that, nor run from it.

Nevertheless, pathetic and lonely, sad and forlorn though I might be, I must at least put this whole thing on paper - for you and for me. Quite sincerely I pray that whatever is lacking in my descriptive abilities isn't assumed to be deficits of her character or spiritual beauty. You see, that's the other issue I want to make as clear as those aforementioned moonlit nights.

My dear Sam, as she preferred to be called, wasn't simply a lady of outward perfection - though she was most certainly unmatched in that envied department - she was unequalled inside and out. When I first saw her it was actually in a photo adorning one of the bare white walls in Bernard Tucker's office in Atlanta. The office was up in Buckhead, with the lofty views you'd expect from a man

with so much money, but it was curiously devoid of decoration. I'd been in the offices of wealthy boxing promoters in the past and they always had things of varied interest that men of wealth surrounded themselves with - or, at least, displayed for the pleasure of their guests. Bernard's office, though, offered no such feast for the eyes. There was the view of Georgia's crown jewel city, a little sitting area in the middle of the vast room, a door that led to an adjoining conference room, and empty walls. There was no art work to show off his buying power. The emptiness of it all made me wonder about him immediately.

On the far wall, though, to the right of the door to the conference room, there she was. It was the lone decorative object in the whole room and under it was a small black table. It was a black and white, nearly as big as a poster, and she was standing on a railroad track, which wandered off into the distance, trees running along past the graveled slopes of the track. She wore a pair of cut-off blue jeans, short enough to beguile any 19 year-old male with a heartbeat. I was mesmerized. Standing atop the rails, her long, beautiful legs were impossible to miss as they disappeared into dark cowboy boots that ran halfway up her calves. And, yet, her soft shoulders, exposed by a faded tank-top, draped by flowing dark hair that appeared to alternate between purely black and softer brown, were just as tanned and alluring as those legs. Her dreamy and somewhat melancholy brown eyes weren't clearly perceived in that photo and yet she still looked at you, through you, and into something you yearned for. That was the impression I always got when I looked at her: you wanted

what she wanted and what she wanted was what was pure and good and unstained in the world.

She had a guitar across her back, the strap crossing in front of her soft chest. She was built a bit like a dancer, I think, and she could have been one, but her art wasn't her body, it was her soul - and her eye for the blessed things of life...the transient, the fragile, the ephemeral, and the beauties hiding in plain sight. I later saw that guitar in her room over the water. It was acoustic, but I hardly noticed it at the time, overwhelmed as I was by her stunning and simple beauty. What a stupid little kid I must have looked like, gaping at her, heart racing with dreams of romance, caught up in the ecstasy of seeing one so beautiful. My brother laughed at me - at least I thought he did. At the time, I figured he chuckled at the obviousness of my response. Of course, as you'll see, I wasn't the center of this drama I'm about to relate. But right then, as was my custom, I was lost in my own head. I must have fidgeted a little in embarrassment, but was utterly incapable of pulling my eyes off of her.

"Pretty girl," Abe said.

"Oh, my," Bernard joined in, his booming voice assaulting my romantic reverence as would a violent cough intrude upon a man's deep and fervent prayer. "You boys aren't lusting after my granddaughter, are you?"

He'd been a Marine during a war, but I could never remember which one - Korea or Vietnam. Forgive me, I don't mean to sound unpatriotic or ungrateful but he jumped around between subjects a lot and had a way about him that made it so that he never gave straight answers to

things. It wasn't that he was being dishonest. He was actually rather manic and had a way of steering conversations with all that energy, so you'd forget to ask him specific questions. You'd start talking about one thing - like his military background - and end up discussing the all-time best cars or something like that. Either way, he was old, rich, and looked and sounded as though he was a drill instructor. That's it: he was this oddball, billionaire drill instructor.

"That's your grand..." I managed weakly, taken aback that the lady had any connection to earth whatsoever.

"And now don't you go off having any festive imaginings about her, if you know what I mean." He smacked me rather vigorously on the back and then punched Abe jokingly in his ridiculously muscled chest. "You look like the sort that does that type of thing rather than have a real woman," he said to me without the bare hint of a smile.

Abe laughed and so did Bernard's assistant, Amish Mike. He wasn't Amish, we discovered, it was just what Bernard called him because he had a soft voice and full beard, so this, to the old man's reasoning, meant that he should be Amish. The other thing to know about Bernard is that he gave people little nick-names that weren't quite flattering.

"That's not funny," I replied, still not looking away from her.

"What? That you're a lusty looking little fellow?" He walked over and sat down on the black sofa.

"You don't lust after her," I heard myself saying. "She's a woman to be loved...experienced...not consumed. And there's nothing in her that asks for that either. Look at the

way she's standing. She's not trying to appeal to that - she's just being herself...just being who she is."

Bernard looked at Abe and said, "Is he for real, this guy?"

Abe smiled at me and shook his head. "He's a writer."

"A writer?"

"Mm hmm."

"Well, golly-jee." He slapped his leg and laughed. "Isn't that just ducky. A writer. Well, listen, Beaver, if this whole thing goes well, you're gonna get a chance to meet her."

"Beaver?"

"It's an old TV show," Abe explained.

"I know the show."

"You even look a little like him," the old man piled on. "Look-it that," he motioned to Amish Mike and pointed at me, "innocence and freckles. Go figure."

"You've a strange idea of a business meeting," my brother cut in, probably not because he was tired of seeing me get zinged and more because he was, well, Abe - impatient and distrustful of anyone this side of Mother Teresa.

"Oh, yeah, yeah. That's fine. I didn't mean to offend the boy - even though he was undressing my granddaughter with his eyes right in front of me. Ha! Just kidding again. No, seriously, seriously...you're right...let's get down to the issue."

"Let's."

"How'd you like to fight for a billion dollars?"

I wasn't looking at Samantha anymore.

Abe stared at him and let me tell you, he's an imposing figure, my brother. I haven't yet said that he was at that point the undefeated *former* light heavyweight champion of the world. He hadn't stopped boxing because he was old, or had been defeated or vexed by some opponent's style...no, nothing like that. Instead, as I'll get to later, he had walked away from the sport altogether due to personal reasons. No one, at least to my knowledge, had ever forced Abe to do anything, or to act in any way contrary to his own determinations. This wasn't due merely to physical skills, regardless of their nearly preternatural nature, but, as was evidenced in that cold stare he looked at Bernard Tucker with, to his deep and probing mind. Most boxers were given nicknames - Sugar Ray, Iron Mike, etc. - but Abe was devoid of one because no one had seen the likes of him before. What do you call a man that defies your history and traditions? He wasn't up on his toes dancing around, or constantly mowing forward seeking a quick end to matters. He wasn't boxer, nor was he puncher; he wasn't a counter-fighter, a defensive wizard, or a body-snatcher. As far as I could tell - and I think I'm a fairly astute boxing observer considering all the boxing I've seen and the obvious fact that he's my brother - Abe could do all of this as well or better than any of the greats ever could, so these monikers were wasted on him. In fact, what I thought worked well was quite simple, as all such ideas generally are if you permit me such an indulgence: I thought him to be The General.

Sure, he was just a boxer, not a real soldier. I know that. But we've always compared boxing to war and no one

better personified that connection than Abe. He was the ultimate in mind/body, like a Patton and his tanks all in one, a Sherman and his rampaging soldiers tearing through fertile Southern land, ripping up infrastructure and slavery at once. Yes, yes, the way he looked at the old man just then reminded me of that unique distinction. Many men feel the heat of their passion, the drive of their will, and the need of the moment, but their bodies can't carry forth their purpose. Abe had experienced one such moment years ago when he was needed for defense but his body couldn't carry out and execute the righteous command. This wasn't in a boxing ring. He was younger then, just a boy really, and I saw him lose. Some boxing writers have criticized him, complaining that there was no way to call him an all-time great because he'd never been tested in the ring; his victories had been too lopsided and his contests without drama. This is fair. But though they never saw his heart tested doesn't mean it never happened. I saw it and I understand the source of his greatness in the ring. There's an old saying in boxing that you never know how good or bad an undefeated fighter is and the logic of this is seen by comparing the great Ali to the emotional wreck that was Tyson. When Ali lost to Frazier in '71, battered as he was, he'd still given as good as any man ever had. Indeed, he'd met a great fighter in a great fight and lost. But he came back, he adjusted to time and age, and styles; he was great. Tyson, on the other hand, lost badly to the first man that stopped his A-game. There was no adjustment, no changing of strategy and he was chopped down methodically by a man named Buster on a cold February night in Japan.

Tyson never came back. Unlike Ali, he could never figure out a way to win those fights he was losing, or defeat a man that had once beaten him. That's how greatness is defined in the ring. That's how Ali, despite his endless array of stylistic oddities - keeping his hands low, bouncing up and down on his toes, never throwing body punches, and pulling straight back from punches - was a great fighter. He had character and Tyson didn't - it was that simple. Tyson was technically superior to Ali; he was just as fast, hit markedly harder - as much as a tornado's winds are superior to a thunderstorm's - and his defense, hands high against the chin and head moving side-to-side, was better. But that's all on paper, as they say. In the ring, on that canvas where the artists work in blood and sweat and pain, Ali overcame his weakness but Tyson, when men adjusted to him, couldn't find a way to prevail.

That the writers wondered about Abe is logical. How would he respond if a man hurt him? What would happen if he was forced to come off the deck or fight with an injury? These are fair questions and I don't resent them being asked, nor do I suspect he does either. But, like I said, I saw the answer years ago. My brother's character under fire is beyond question. He's The General to me and I've seen him on that day when he ordered forward his troops but they couldn't prevail, watched him deal with loss and frustration but, importantly, saw that he was not defeated. That's what is hard to understand in our culture - here in the modern West; he was not defeated though he didn't win. How is this possible? We'll get to that.

Anyway, he's standing there looking at this ridiculously wealthy and prodigiously eccentric old man and studying him. That's what any great general would do, they would scrutinize and think and wonder until they grasped the issue. Knowing preceded action, I could almost hear him say to me because it was something he'd said often enough.

"Yep," the old man nodded, crossed his legs and sat back as if fully satisfied, "you heard me right. I said a BILLION."

Abe stared, shaking his head rather slightly, almost imperceptibly.

"And I know you know who I am," Bernard went on. "I know you must've researched me after our Amish friend contacted you. You know that I have the resources for this or else you wouldn't be here. He told you that I had an offer for you that a man of action and principle couldn't refuse. I told him to tell you that because I knew that would get your attention. I knew that would work exactly because it would have worked with me. We're the same type of man. Now I can't do the things you've made look easy. God didn't touch me with his finger and make me an Achilles. But we're still the same in many ways, you and me. That's how I knew what would get you here."

Abe stared at him strangely and at times like this his brown eyes could look black, as dark as his skin. His green Nike t-shirt was hugging his powerful physique and his muscles looked flexed, ready for battle. I saw the muscles of his forearm flex; deep gashes running from elbow to wrist appeared and then faded as he shifted his weight. He was thinking of something, wanted to say something but stopped himself, apparently mulling over his options.

Frankly, I was surprised to see him appear uncertain, which he certainly never seemed to be and this, I could tell, bothered him no small amount. A fighter knows when he isn't in control and instantly recognizes the danger. Lesser men stay where they are and hope for the best but the greats - the champions - recognize their vulnerability (isn't that odd?) and hurry to make defensive adjustments. I've seen this difference with my own eyes, both in boxing and also in life; the mediocre men fail and fumble and fall because they haven't taken seriously the prospect of loss. Abe took it ever so seriously and was, consequently, deeply prepared for it, knew what it looked like, smelled like, and felt like. He could feel the icy fingers of defeat stretch forth a hand, first this and then a wicked, unbreakable embrace. He knew it in his bones and respected it; he had no delusions of invulnerability. This is what makes the great better than the average, if you ask me. They recognize danger and yet still find a way in their discipline to trust their instincts.

Abe trusted his and turned to leave.

"C'mon, Charlie," he said to me as he passed.

I was surprised and yet again I wasn't. It was his nature. He knew he had no hand to play and, just as importantly, he also perceived that the ridiculous enormity of the purse had rattled him. Being thus situated, he felt trapped, unable to think clearly, and so he'd slip away from danger with his footwork like he would from any other foe. They could never touch him.

"Seriously?" Bernard said as I looked at him somewhat apologetically. He jumped up from his seat with more

energy than you'd figure a man so old would have. I think he was 80ish.

Amish Mike started towards us, waving his hands pleadingly, disarmingly, beckoning Abe to stay and hear them out. "I know it's a crazy thing," he was saying, "I know it sounds outlandish and impossible but hear him out."

Abe stopped at the door, one step from the hallway. He held it half open and we could hear the distant voices of a couple down the hall. His dark eyes, disbelieving, probing, nearly threatening, pushed back at Amish Mike, who had that short, light hair but full, thick beard. In that soft voice of his, that seemed to know no guile or cunning, he said, "Hear him out...please. He's the best man I've ever known."

"Maybe you've known all scoundrels," Abe replied.

His green eyes were as soft as his voice and he said, "Bernard's never lied to me. You can trust him. Hear him out. Just hear him out. This is serious...he isn't messing with you. He knows you and respects you."

Abe closed the door, leaned against it and crossed one leg in front of the other. He folded his arms across his chest. Anyone else standing there like that might look reposed, non-threatening, but my brother's demeanor, and his muscular, cat-like physique, always made him appear ready to burst into action. Perhaps it was because I'd seen him snap forward so many times before and knew what he was capable of that the image was burned into my mind. Whatever the case, he looked at Bernard and didn't say anything. His expression said it all.

Bernard walked right up to him. I wasn't used to people doing that to Abe but the old man seemed almost crazy. I

don't think Abe would have ever hit a geezer but, then again, I wouldn't put it past him either.

"It's a unique proposal, I know," Bernard said in that gravel voice of his. His face was tanned and weather beaten, but the deep lines seemed to come from years of repeated expression rather than just age. Blazing blue eyes jumped out at you, something remarkable and striking amidst nothing else of note. His nose was long and thin. His hair was nearly shaved from his head, merely a sprinkling of ash over his bronze noggin. And his teeth were rather yellow too, which struck me because in this day when Americans are so vain, even our poor have teeth as white as pure, fresh snow. They'd go to the mall for a whitening, spend a hundred dollars and then go buy groceries with their card, overdrawing their account, and no one thought anything of it. So, having a billionaire standing in front of you with yellowed teeth, slightly crooked, showed something interesting about him. I'm sure Abe saw it too. To me, I suppose, it showed a man utterly devoid of vanity because this is America and in America, if you have the money, you don't need to suffer from cosmetic deficiencies. His thick black glasses were new but by no means were they a designer brand. They probably cost a couple of hundred dollars. And he was wearing baggy Dockers and t-shirt. He wore a belt that was pulled a few notches. Perhaps he'd lost some weight recently, though it looked like he was always pretty thin.

He stood slightly crooked and the way he talked and gestured reminded me of an old basketball hoop we had back home that was tilted forward from the stress of all the

dunks it had endured. Yeah, he leaned into you a bit - not to intimidate, I don't think. I saw an old photo of Lyndon Johnson towering over somebody once, pointing a finger in his face. Bernard wasn't like that. He was just eager. He was full of energy and enthusiasm and that's what brought him close to the people he addressed. Under his short sleeves, old guy skin sagged a bit over what looked to be some admirable muscle. He looked like a guy that probably could have gone a few rounds back in his day. In fact, he looked like a guy that probably still thought he could go a few rounds and then would have a heart attack in the process.

"A billion dollars," he said again. "I'm not lying. I'll pay you that to fight...and win."

"Winner take all?"

"Yes, sir. I don't do guarantees. Life doesn't come with guarantees. In fact, that's one of the reasons I like you, Abraham Johnson. You don't live like the rest of the folks today. You're a man of your word. A man of honor. You don't expect something just for showin' up."

Bernard turned to pace and put his hands in his pockets and then took them out again. Being still for a moment wasn't one of his talents.

"The whole world started goin to hell the minute politicians and lawyers convinced the average man that there were things they didn't have to pay for. Now, you might think I'm against Democrats and, no - I don't like them anymore than I like a colonoscopy - but they're just the consequence, a symptom, if you will."

He paced over to the window and pointed out at the city below. "Look-it that. A million people who've lived their lives in debt...figuring that someone else always had the money for them to do the things they need to do. That kills a man's work-ethic, Abe Johnson. It kills his character.

"Do you need an education? Taxpayers should pay, or you get a loan, or a grant. Used to be a family paid. Do you want a house? Go to the bank and borrow...yes, borrow. And who do they borrow from, all these mindless millions? They borrow from men like me. They borrow from men that have done it the old way - worked and saved in order to have it today. But - and here's the thing," he walked back over and got really close to Abe, pointing a finger in his face, "men don't *need* houses and education. They need character. They need to work and to save the product of that work. That's what a man needs, Abe Johnson. That's what this world needs to bring it back from the abyss."

"The abyss?"

He smiled a crooked, yellow smile and threw his hands up excitedly. "The West is crashing, my boy. The West is dying from lack of character."

"Fascinating. And it has what to do with me, boxing and a boat load of money?"

Bernard threw a punch at him - I mean a real punch... out of nowhere. It happened so suddenly that I wasn't sure I actually saw reality and hadn't, in fact, lapsed into some absurd reverie. It was a quick right hand. It darted right at Abe but, the old guy wasn't quick enough. Abe slipped his head to the right with ridiculous celerity and then, just as fast, his feet wheeled him around and he was off the door.

The punch smacked into the door. It was solid. Bernard hadn't meant to pull the punch if Abe hadn't moved.

In that instant, with Abe's feet planting and his hands on stand-by, curling into the fistic missiles they were, that crazy old man fell in a heap to the brightly shining hardwood floor. He was in pain, but he was laughing too. It was so very bizarre.

Puzzled, Abe looked over his shoulder at me; then we both looked at Amish Mike who was taking the whole thing in stride and was on his cell phone getting ready to call Bernard's doctor to schedule an appointment for his hand. Yep, Bernard's on the ground laughing and holding his hand in pain and his assistant was just nonchalantly calling his personal physician...happens all the time.

"You see, you see!" Bernard managed to say through his pain and laughing and brought himself to a seat on the floor against the wall next to the door. "See that? That's what I'm talking about. Those reflexes! My God, those reflexes! Did you see that? Did you!"

Amish Mike nodded and put a finger in his other ear and walked off to speak into the phone.

"To do that...to do what you just did...that takes years of practice. That's your savings, my boy. That's the product of your hard work. Mine is the money I've amassed, and the properties and businesses. Yours are your reflexes. And when you move...man! It's beautiful. I see that the way Lusty sees my granddaughter. It's gorgeous. You didn't just get out of the way - you did it with style, with power, and with grace. Sugar Ray Leonard couldn't be so sweet."

He pulled himself to his feet. "That's what I want to honor. Your skills are the dramatic manifestation of what I've done my whole life." He turned to me and said, a little too loudly, with almost maniacal fun in his bright eyes, "How do you like that one, writer boy?"

Abe started to laugh, shook his head and said, "You're certifiable, old man."

"That's not the first time I've heard that."

"And you think that by trying to sucker punch me I'd be amused?"

"How'd you see it coming? Huh? Did I telegraph? Pull it back?"

"You dipped your shoulder a little."

Bernard's mouth fell open in delightful surprise and he shook his head and laughed.

"Plus, you gave me a weird little look first, and then the shoulder."

"Brilliant. That's brilliant. And that's exactly what I want." He went and sat on the arm of the couch and inspected his hand, moving it this way and that, wincing as he did so.

"Why so much money, Mr. Tucker?"

Bernard sighed, looked over his shoulder at Amish Mike who returned a look of strange melancholy. Suddenly all the manic energy and dynamism was out of the room and there was a heavy, silent air. Abe walked closer to him and stopped a few feet short, waiting.

"Because I'm dead in a few months - at the most."

Abe put his hands in the pockets of his basketball pants and stood there, head bowed, thinking.

“So you wanna give away all your money?” I asked, impatient that Abe hadn’t said anything.

Bernard made a face and said, “Something like that, Lusty.”

“Who do you want me to fight?”

“Joel Arthur.”

“The MMA guy? That’s nuts. I’m not stepping into a cage to fight and he’s not going into a ring. No way. Not gonna happen. Not even as a death-present for you or anybody.”

“Who said anything about a ring or a cage?” Amish Mike chimed in, talking a seat on the couch near Bernard and glancing over at his rapidly swelling wrist.

“Man...you guys are a trip...”

“Joel’s under contract to that bald menace peddling his MMA brand. The man knows nothing about real fighting - the art and science. All he wants is a bloodbath. He oughta be wearin’ a bed-sheet. He’s a Roman,” Bernard explained with considerable force and passion, full of a few choice expletives that I’ve omitted.

I must pause and explain quickly that I’m leaving out the cussing, at least for the most part, not for any religious issues or some such thing. No. I actually wrote them - included them - in my initial draft but, you know, I just can’t feel comfortable with too much profanity, especially in retrospect. Sam swore a few times when I was with her and it never quite seemed natural to her. Of course, everyone swears rather naturally these days and you rarely make it through a single day without hearing a torrent of F-bombs and the like. Something being common place, however, doesn’t automatically include it in art. I know, I know...in

striving for realism we ought to stay pretty close to the script as read by the actors - in this case Bernard, Amish Mike and my brother - but that philosophy of art, specifically in regard to literature, is missing a huge point. I'm selective in what I'm including, right? Of course I am. All writers are and we have to be or else our work would be insufferably pointless. That's the thing as a writer and, as Sam would say, as an artist and photographer - we're selective. We choose what to leave out and what to emphasize. I can't say I spent much time thinking about it until I met Sam and saw how serious she was about this issue, but she's absolutely and unequivocally right. To focus on the mundane might be necessary for some artistic reason perhaps; to focus on the lower aspects of life, though, is contemptuous of real art.

One day, when I asked her why she wanted to be a photographer, she said that she sought to capture the beautiful, in all its varied forms, whenever she could. And she said that beauty was always good and true too. She'd thought about that a lot; beauty was never evil, nor could it be a lie. There's beauty in the world and the artist is beauty's soldier, protecting life from the ugly and profane - which can easily overtake an hour, a day, and a lifetime. So, an artist that rejects this trinity of virtues, and replaces them with their antithesis - evil, lies, and perversion - is as bad a destroyer, or worse, than Hitler or Mao or Stalin. Those men murdered millions of bodies, but such an "artist" slaughters the soul. You tell me which is worse. Now...I know...I know - that's rather hyperbolic. Yeah. Abe tells me I'm too overdramatic. Fine. But I mean it.

So, anyway, I recoiled when I saw the profanity on my page the same way I would if I saw a photo of a man defecating. What would be the point of that except to prove that my soul was ugly and I reveled in the ugliness and wanted the world to rejoice in it? The reader who has become so desensitized by all the repugnance, profanity, and lust that's in this world might deem my omission as some kind holier-than-thou type of thing. It's certainly not that. I'm not judging anyone in this retelling. Well, maybe I do in some ways. I don't think we can help judging. I just don't think I'm feeling superior or something like that...just making an artistic decision, thank you.

Well, as you may have guessed then, Bernard was rather loose with his language. My brother was too, though not nearly as prolific as Bernard. You get the point. One's an old-timer and war veteran and the other's a boxer. We aren't talking about seminary students here. To be sure, I include the gist of what they said and, in some cases, where it suits my purposes - especially to preserve the spirit in which they moved and sometimes to convey the comic nature of their language and swearing - I include some of their earthy flourishes. They can be funny sometimes, I must admit. I see it editorially as whether to describe bodily functions - and, for the record, Bernard was an unabashedly gassy old guy. Sometimes profanity can be humorous, like Bernard farting and then smiling mischievously, but there's a fine line not to cross. For example, that picture of Sam on the wall in Bernard's office. I found out later was a self-portrait. She had listened to a song about a lover leaving on a train and the idea came to

her about standing on the tracks like that. It's romantic. She's wondrously sexy and yet there's nothing remotely pornographic about it. She's not making a sexy face as so many girls stupidly do today in their vain and vacuous selfies. She's an artist and she captures so much in that photo - the allure and mystery of the train tracks, the bygone beauty of that style of travel and a concomitant sense of the loss of things. And she's so achingly beautiful; those deep brown eyes soft even against the hard tracks below. You have to see it...somehow she captures innocence, and beauty, and the way love surprises you in a hard world always on the move. The tracks lead to nowhere in the distance because where you want to go in life, your dreams, often takes you away from what's truly real and what's real isn't iron and steel.

Sam told all of this in a photo. That's what I saw and that's why Bernard kept irritating me with his prurient jokes. Frankly, I was tolerating him and his blather because I was hoping to hear more about her.

Anyway, back to Bernard. He lambasted the MMA guy for a bit longer.

"The man has no interest in developing fighters, just in interesting fights for his fans - if you count as interesting a bloodbath but discount skill and defense."

"If you're trying to get me to agree with you, don't worry about it," Abe said. "None of that matters, though. He ain't doing a boxing match and I'm not gonna fight in a cage. How do you get around that?"

"Easy," Amish Mike started and his soothing, calm voice was a great contrast to Bernard's manic loudness. "Joel

Arthur isn't under contract at present. He's still negotiating for another multi-fight deal. We caught up to him while he's in-between and made him the same offer we're making to you."

"And what's that exactly?" There was an impatient edge to Abe's voice.

"A private match between the two of you at Bernard's property in Florida."

"It'll be old-school," Bernard said excitedly. "I know you like old-school. You've done things the right way. You know your history. No time limits and no limitations."

"You're kidding me, right?"

"Nope. No gloves...nothing. Just two of the best men in the world having a fight without interference. Winner takes the whole pot - a billion dollars. No fees to agents, casinos, refs, judges, or anybody else."

"Taxes?"

"We'll structure it so that the winner walks with the flat billion..." Amish Mike said.

"If you can call a billion flat." Bernard laughed.

"Right, right. We'll set it up so that it's a straight up billion to the winner. No gimmicks."

"And the loser?"

"Loses," Bernard said.

"How do you lose?"

"When the fight's over. Fighter can surrender by tap or verbally or be unconscious."

"Who will enforce that?"

"You and Joel Arthur and your honor. Like I said, there'll be no interference from anyone. It's a fight."

“No time limits?”

“Nope. If I die during the fight, you guys just keep on going,” he laughed.

“And with you terminal, when is this thing supposed to happen?”

He looked at me suspiciously and said to Abe, “Soon, my boy.” Then, with a wink, and in a voice that was like a whisper, except that Bernard absolutely couldn't speak softly, he added, “We can go over the specifics - date, time, et cetera - later.”

“We'll provide for you anything you need,” Amish Mike started. “But you must train for the duration on our island in Florida. That way we can be sure that word won't leak out. You can tell people that you're taking a vacation. Train at our expense and then have the fight. It's that easy. No contracts for anything else. The money is already in a separate account and afterwards we'll give the winner the account number and passwords for it. Also, I'd be happy to offer any guidance you desire as to what to do with the money once you leave in case you'd like advice.”

“My sexy granddaughter will be there for the month too, Lusty,” Bernard said to me. “She and the family spend our August on the island. It's a family tradition of sorts...”

I made a face at him but was rather excited to hear that. I knew he knew that too. I'm told that I wear my emotions on my sleeve too much for business men like Bernard and Amish Mike not to have noticed that I was more interested in Sam than any amount of money. In fact, for a second I zoned out, lost track of their negotiations and began to wonder if Bernard was actually such an astute man of

business that he knew putting her picture up would appeal to me, lure me and, in turn, make me push for Abe to take the fight. If he was that cunning and sagacious, that scared me a little. Of course, the sad thing is that I didn't mind it totally. If you're going to be manipulated, this was the way to do it, I suppose.

They went back and forth for quite a bit longer. At one point Abe went over and looked at Bernard's hand, inspected it and concluded that he'd likely sprained his wrist and hadn't broken anything. "If your wrist hadn't buckled when you hit the door, you'd have a fracture."

"Twenty years ago I'd have punched a hole in the door," the old man laughed. He winced as Abe moved his hand.

"The wrist is the weak link for a lot of people when they punch hard. But...sometimes weakness saves a man."

I thought that line was funny. It didn't seem as though he was just talking about the hand. Bernard didn't say anything either, so I suspect he thought the same thing I did.

After that they asked me if I'd leave the room so that they could discuss the specifics. Amish Mike didn't put it quite like that - he said that I was free to go wander around, maybe get a bite to eat, because they'd be going over rather boring nuances. All the same, I got the impression that they wanted me out of the room for some reason or another. This was okay anyway because I had absolutely no interest in financial talk and various legal technicalities. And it's not that I found that stuff boring - it actually irritated me. At that point in my life, I didn't see the point to it all; it seemed that finance and money were the domains

of other men. Abe's different in that he's actually quite a details person. He reads the Wall Street Journal and other financial stuff, which may as well be printed in a lost language as far as I was concerned. I've gotten better at all that now, as you'll see, but at the time I was more than happy to go do something else. Anything would suffice, even up to getting eaten by a shark. Seriously.

Underneath the photo of Sam there was a long table with a bunch of magazines and books on its dark top. The table was probably some rather impressive imported type of thing but I have no idea about that stuff either. What I did notice, though, amongst the financial magazines and other refuse, was a small book of photography. Jackpot! It was all photos by Sam. Unfortunately there wasn't a single one of her for me to gape and marvel at. I lingered there, looking through her photos, seeing the world through the eye of her lens, and finally I made my way back down to the lobby and waited for Abe to finish.

CHAPTER 2

WE PULLED out of our driveway and onto the main road a little after nine in the morning on the last Friday in July. The morning sun, hot and bright in all its summer glory, hung over us in a sky uninterrupted by clouds. We drove Abe's black Dodge Ram and had the back seat loaded with our stuff. The covered bed was locked and full of training gear, miscellaneous clothing, and fishing gear. Frankly, I had my stuff in the backseat. I only had a few things that I wore often, so that wasn't taking up much space - just one suitcase. On the floor under the seat I had another bag full of books that I was reading. Also, I had bought a couple of photography magazines from the supermarket the night before in order to brush up on the latest - you know, in order to have something intelligent to say to Sam when I met her, but that was pretty much a mistake because I knew cameras about as well as I knew high finance. Appreciating the art and skill of the photographer doesn't translate to knowledge of the medium and I scanned through the articles without much frame of reference. Sadly, they were somewhat too technical to be of use or

interest to me and they ended up half-folded, half-crumpled in the compartment on the passenger side door.

Contrary to my Spartan provisions of essential wardrobe and reading material, Abe had several extra bags and suitcases in the bed. I had no idea what they were except for the aforementioned boxing and fishing items. He always liked to fish but didn't go as often as he liked. It was meditative to him and, as I heard him explain once, indicative of his boxing style, which was to get opponents to take the bait, thus leaving themselves exposed to his swift, sharp counters. The fisherman and the boxer, he'd say, were similar in that patience was the supreme virtue. Too many fighters threw strikes they shouldn't yet throw, without reference to the opponent and consequently they left themselves open for counters or, in the least, lessened the effectiveness of their ill-timed blows. Just because a boxer could do something didn't demand that he should do it, he was fond of pointing out. "Let the bait work," he'd instruct me. "Rare is the foe that isn't in a hurry. Rarer still is the man so at peace with himself that you can't goad him into taking the lead when he shouldn't.

"Against a professional enemy," he went on, "the chances of leading on him, of scoring attacks when he's perfectly set, are akin to me jumping in the water and catching fish with my bare hands. It can happen, yes. But it's wrought with risks, not to mention very tiring too. The master lets his opponent work to his own demise; he lets the enemy help him to hit him. Remember, Charlie, fishing, like boxing, is knowing where to cast the bait and then letting it bring the fish to you."

Yep...he was the General, like I said.

He read quite a bit too. Primarily, I read fiction; Abe, to my knowledge, hasn't read too many novels and none recently that I can remember. He must have when he was younger because he seems to know the classics. Being eleven years younger than him I have no recollection of anything he was doing before he was almost twenty. Presently, he reads quite a bit of military history, though, and he's a huge fan of Patton, Sherman and some Greek guy too. I always forget his name. Abe doesn't talk much most of the time, but if you get him on the subject of war or boxing history it's like trying to take a sip from a fire hydrant. He doesn't shut-up.

So, frankly, I've no idea what else he packed. It's not like he tries to be mysterious, I don't think - he just doesn't openly talk about every little thing in his life and, as you probably noticed already, I have a limited field of interests. Most people today, especially because of the internet and social media, know so little about so much; I'm the exact opposite and for that I don't apologize. The odd facts about a trillion things don't excite me. To tell you the truth, that's exactly what's wrong with our world - no one has an attention span for any real thinking. Add to that the social pressure of having to be up on the latest nonsense and you have a perfect combination for imbecility. And it's really rather surprising that in a country where we're supposed to be free, everyone is so similar. We're all supposed to love education but our education is all the same. If I want to go to college to study literature I'll end up in a classroom learning math because that's supposed to make me well-

rounded. Well, that's just a bunch of rubbish (my favorite British expression, if you'll allow me to use it). Why this fuss about being well-rounded? Do you really care if the author of your favorite book is an algebra idiot? Or, more pressing, do you care if your surgeon has read War and Peace? It's the contemporary insanity of our whole country. Teachers have degrees in education rather than the subject they're teaching and even if they did they'd only have about a fifth of their studies focused on that subject. Go figure. This is all just a bunch of conformity, I say. I get a "degree" in literature by reading, don't I? And then, if I meet a few friends for lunch and we start talking about the books we've read and the movies we've seen, that's the stuff of life and education. If you ask me, our education system is doomed because we've decided that everyone needs a degree, which means that millions of people that don't truly, hopelessly love their subjects are flooding the classrooms and, therefore, no one's really getting into the soul of things anymore.

Our mother had loved to read.

We'll talk about her later. I'll try and stay focused.

Anyway, much of Abe's fascination with military history, war, boxing, self-defense, etc., all stems from our family situation. He's obsessed with safety and I can't blame him because that's the role he embraced rather than be a victim. I have to admit, albeit reluctantly, that I'd be quite a victim if it hadn't been for him, but this is probably the case for most of us in our lives, especially when we're young. Someone has to be strong for us; someone has to protect us from the predators and the calamities of life that would

stalk us. Abe's been my shield. We're brothers, yes, but because of this fact, and due to being so far apart in years, it's not a relationship of near equals as you probably already figured out.

It wasn't that his history knowledge and *Art of War* mind weren't fascinating to me, but it's a little hard to find something compelling when you know you can't quite do it yourself. He's the greatest fighter on the planet and I'm, well, certainly not. Imagine if he was Michael Jordan. I'd be his four-foot little brother. If he was Tiger Woods, I'd shoot 90 - on the front nine. He's one of the greatest fighters ever and I've lost my one and only fight - and that was to a girl down the street from where I grew up. I probably could have beaten her but for a fighter to prevail (I've heard Abe speak of this) he must first have courage. I have fear. I hate confrontation. So, in a way, having the two of us driving down the highway together, just past Asheville city limits, is like having a beauty queen and the Elephant Man sharing a ride.

I haven't said yet, so here goes. One of the great things about writing is that on paper a man can do what Abe does in the ring. All he has to do is imagine it, write it, and so it is. That's the beauty of it. A writer can hide in his pages, soar on his prose, and defend his shortcomings with his wits. Abe defends himself with his fists, his matchless footwork, that pristine sense of timing and judgment of distance. He's a master of time and space, a champion of the physical world. I hurl words at reality. The strange thing is, of course, that you'll only know of this because I'm telling you. His exploits and preternatural talents will fade, my

words carry on; he'll grow older, his reflexes will get creaky and unpredictable, like an old engine wearing out. In this way a writer is higher than the fighter.

Much as it behooves me to hide behind my words and not reveal myself, this story won't exactly allow that since I'm a central player in it.

I've told you the obvious differences between our physical prowess - his athletic excellence and my shocking lack thereof, but until now I've omitted the most obvious differences between the two of us: he's black, I'm white. Yep, same mother but different fathers. I actually resemble my mother. She was very thin, and somewhat frail. Her chronic alcoholism certainly contributed to her physical decline - especially after I was born, but it also, one would rightly assume, encouraged my dilapidation.

I'm about 5'7 and weigh, the last time I stepped on a scale, 145 pounds. My hair is straight and mostly blond. It was really blond when I was younger but it has since gotten a shade or two darker. Now, seriously, I don't think I'm a bad looking guy by any stretch and have a pleasant enough face with an average nose, light brown eyes and, I've been told, a look of sincerity and genuineness about me. That, frankly, was the greatest compliment I ever got except for when one girl I had a crush on a few years back read a story I wrote and told me that it was excellent. "I knew you had 'stuff' in you, Charlie, but not this kind of 'stuff.'" That was, to date, the best thing anyone has ever said to me. Still, though, she was never interested in me beyond being my friend. I'm a great listener, as I've been told by every woman/girl I've ever been attracted to, which should tell

you all you need to know about my romantic past - or, more appropriately, the lack thereof.

No...I've never gotten the girl. Never. Not once. I could spend time explaining why but I'm sure you'll see it for yourself.

Okay, but back to my unimpressive, actually depressing, physical tale of the tape.

Whereas Abe's muscles even seem to have muscles, I've got the muscle mass of a Bic pen. If I hold up my arm to flex my bicep, instead of a muscle a little sign appears - "space for rent." I know, I know...that's a crap joke, but it's basically the truth. Add to this that I'm slightly asthmatic and you get the idea of my physical perturbation. It's not that I'm uncoordinated, though. I can get around well enough and actually know how to box - and look pretty good when I'm doing it. The problem is that I've got the stamina of your average corpse, a chin troubled by high wind advisories, and a punch only slightly more powerful than that of a Girl Scout. If we inverted the rounds so they were one-minute work, three-minute rest, and it was all bag work or shadow boxing - or I could box the aforementioned Girl Scout (perhaps even the corpse) - then it's not a stretch to suggest that I'd be a respectable pugilist.

The worst of this is still to come, as hard as that might be to believe.

My mother's alcoholism left me as a rather unhealthy little baby. In my mind I see myself lying there on the doctor's table with a scrawny, emaciated little baby body, with my current head. I dare say, most regrettably, that it's just that vision that dominates my woeful self-image. Worse

still is that my hearing was also effected, but mainly in my left ear, which is almost totally deaf. So, taking long drives like the one to Bernard's little paradise, with Abe driving and on my deaf side, would be impossible for me except that I have a hearing aid for that ear. I usually don't wear it; instead I work hard to keep everyone in life on my right side. This isn't too difficult, although people begin to suspect something's amiss by the way I have to finagle the situations to favor my good ear. Even when I wear the aid, which isn't often because it's large, uncomfortable, it has a tendency to give feedback - which I can't hear but causes everyone else to wonder where that weird alien squealing is coming from.

I swear: if I ever see a pregnant woman drinking, I'm liable to slap her.

Things aren't too bad when I'm with Abe because he knows I can't hear. Meeting Bernard was cool too because his voice was so loud and deep. It's soft spoken people that I dread and, sometimes, detest. This is yet another reason, besides my physical dilapidation, that I take refuge in the written word. When I'm reading, the comprehension playing field is level and I'm just like everyone else: able to understand every word. I've heard that when someone is blind they lose touch with things, but when they're deaf they lose touch with people. That rings true. I haven't had much success with girls because flirting is quite the chore when you can't hear them in the first place. And girls aren't prone to flirt loudly. Well, not anyone you'd want to flirt with anyway. Good luck having a witty comeback - you know, the comic one-liner the romantic Will Smith type says - when

you didn't hear her in the first place. And please don't misunderstand this as whining. I certainly don't mean to gripe but I really must give an account of myself and, I assure you, it's a task I'd most like to skip while remaining anonymous.

Well, nevertheless, there you have it: I'm small, weak, asthmatic, deaf, and afraid of confrontation. I've lost a fight to a girl but never had a girlfriend. And I've grown up in the shadow of the world's greatest fighter. Also, I've never come close to having sex and have only kissed two girls in my life - neither of which I'd like to discuss or think about ever again.

Like I said, I'm virtually the antithesis of Abe.

He's a good seven inches taller than me. Where I'm small, pale and weak, he's broad-shouldered, dark and obviously powerful. He keeps his hair cut real short, especially on the sides. He grew a beard for a while but shaved and now just has the mustache and dark hair on his chin. It's a better look for him, if you ask me. The beard just wasn't him for some reason. He's got long, thin cheeks and sometimes he looks at you with his chin down and you see those dark eyes studying you and it's something else. I'm not sure it's because he's what you'd call handsome, though. I think, rather, that he's compelling. Not that he's bad looking. It's really hard to say. But there's something about those eyes and the way he looks at you that's compelling.

Don't get me wrong, he's got a great and wide smile that's happy and carefree. It's just that you don't see it too often. I certainly don't mean to suggest that he's always in a

bad mood. That's not it. He's quick and fidgety, strangely enough. And he talks real fast most of the time - though of late I've noticed he seems to be forcing himself to slow down. He loves speed. When he gets excited, it's hard to keep up with him - everything he does is in super fast mode. It's that combination of his great will, his discipline and focus, and all that speed that makes him so dangerous.

With women, I can rarely look them in the eye - something I'm ashamed to admit. I'm aware of it because I've seen the opposite from Abe. He looks directly at you - especially a woman he's interested in. But his eyes can say things. That's his thing with women; he's got that way of looking at them and, of course, he's got that confidence too. He looks at them and is somehow able to convey his interest in a glance. I tried that once and the girl accused me of freaking her out. She said I was staring at her and looked like a serial killer.

So, he's the greatest boxer on the planet; I have never won a fight. And he can look at a woman and his eyes tell her, "hi...I find you really interesting..." but mine say, "I bury bodies in my backyard."

You'd think some of his better characteristics would rub off on me.

Anyway, our mother died when I was five. We were living in Schenectady, New York at the time. After she died we moved in with my mom's sister and her family over in Albany on Grand Street. My mother was Italian and her sister, who hadn't gotten into all the trouble with alcohol and men that she had, had married an Italian guy they'd known from growing up. His name was Frank Carranzo and

they had five kids together. We were all jammed in there together- a brownstone apartment with three bedrooms, one for the parents, one for the three sisters, and one for the four of us boys. I actually spent a few years sleeping on the couch in the living room and only when I was 8 or 9 did they scrape enough money together to buy an extra bed.

When I was 10 Abe had made enough money from boxing that he got us a small rental house. I seriously don't remember the place on Grand Street too much except that it was always crowded, loud and I was never alone. I got along fairly well with my cousins but, naturally, I never was one of them. The boys were very rough and I never felt safe playing with them. Being rather sensitive, and having lost my mother, it was awkward at best. It's weird to say, but true, that I remember being lonely even in a house full of mirth and conversation and people.

The house we moved to in Schenectady, oddly on Albany Street, was near the YMCA boxing gym that Abe was fighting out of and it was basically a crack house that he found cheap. Our neighbors were drug dealers, drug abusers, professional welfare collectors, and assorted losers. The streets were cluttered with debris. The houses were as worn and dilapidated as the lives that inhabited them.

I loved it.

We were somewhere in South Georgia when I asked Abe about the fight. I could tell he'd been thinking deeply about it because he gets this intense look when he's

contemplative. If you don't know him, you'll see him in such a mood and assume he's angry, but he's actually just uncommonly focused. His opponents see pretty much the same look in the ring and it's an intimidating visage that's studying, thinking, testing and learning. It's a look that unsettles you because his dark eyes seem to be taking in things you'd rather not divulge - little errors, unconscious habits, tendencies, preferences and mannerisms that you have yet to admit even to yourself.

I don't think that if you were to happen upon a photo of him that you'd necessarily find him to be handsome. His face isn't attractive in the same way a movie star or model is; he's a bit deep, and looks sullen much of the time, so photos don't do him justice. But his eyes are lightning, darting this way and that in great flashes of intensity and his expressions are full of contrasting storms that appear as if in the distance, as though he's keeping himself from you, moving along the perimeter, watching, learning, studying. Everything about him is action and he's not meant to be looked at - at least not in the way that our contemporary culture, superficial and vain as it is, sees things.

Well, we were cruising along the highway under a sweltering summer sun, so intense as to give the impression that everything in the peach state was melting, turning to liquid, and burning away, when I interrupted an hour long silence.

"Aren't you worried about fighting an MMA guy?"

He didn't seem irritated in the least to hear the question, which was good. It meant that he took the whole matter of Arthur's vastly different style and tactics quite seriously.

"I worry about fighting anyone," he replied casually and scratched at an itch on his ear.

"Are you gonna be in a ring or a cage?"

"Neither."

"Huh?"

"We're gonna do something different. You'll see."

I looked at him with evident exasperation. "What the hell?" I said.

"You were pretty focused on that book in his office before you left. What was so special about that anyway?"

"Oh. Yeah. Well, it was by her...Samantha...his granddaughter. It was her photography."

"Oh."

"She's quite good, I think."

"What do you know about photography?"

"What? Huh? I know something about art. I know something about expressing yourself and capturing things that are interesting...and beautiful."

"I was just asking."

"Her stuff...how can I say it? It was personal. She liked shots of movement in nature, like a leaf falling, or a storm, a snowfall. There was always change and a sense of quiet in her every shot - and a sense of timelessness, like you could be looking back through the decades or ahead to the future. There was that sense of even as things were changing, they weren't; like you could change inside, but the world around you, despite the variances, was gonna stay the same."

He looked at me oddly and didn't say anything. He did that sometimes - give me that look - and I could never tell if

he was moved by what I said, intrigued perhaps, or thought it erroneous and a little pathetic.

"Okay," he nodded. "How old is she?"

"I think she's 24."

"That too old for you?"

"Shut up."

"Who knows? Maybe being so deep herself, she'll find you interesting even though you're younger."

"It's only a few years."

He smiled at me.

"But, anyway, listen...this fight...are you sure about this?" I wanted to get off the subject of Sam and my hopeless odds with her.

He shrugged and I saw that as he answered he was thinking the thing through, editing as he spoke, critiquing his words.

"Am I sure? Absolutely not. But being certain is a luxury that doesn't exist in the fight game, Charlie."

"I'm surprised you're doing it."

He nodded again. Many thoughts were churning behind the scenes, left unspoken. He looked like a chess master studying the board. He drummed his thumb on the steering wheel.

"This whole thing's just so...irregular," I protested weakly, looking out past the highway at a winding road down past Macon that wandered off into the moist southern heat. "Do you trust him?"

"We're going, aren't we?"

"What're you gonna do with so much money? I can't even bring myself to say it - a billion...a billion...it sounds

ridiculous. It sounds impossible. Who fights for so much money? Who gives so much money away?"

"Wow. You didn't say anything at the meeting."

"I know. I figured you knew what you were doing."

"Well, little bro, it's funny. I've lived long enough to have a few regrets. And there's a few things I wish I did differently...a few things I wish I could have done for Mom."

"What's that got to do with the fight?"

"It's not a fight."

"What is it then?"

"A match. A fight's about anger...and greed, envy and hatred. A fight is always about those things. A match isn't. It can be, but it doesn't have to be. You understand?"

"Why can't a fight just be about simple misunderstandings with both parties innocently blundering their way into battle?"

He shook his head. "No. An argument maybe, but not violence." He smiled at me in a way I didn't like because it conveyed that I didn't get something deep, yet elemental about life. "Charlie, no one ever innocently attacks someone. It's always greed and envy, then hate. People can't hate if they don't suffer from the lust for things. That's the way it is."

"You're talking about greed and you're fighting for a billion bucks, dude."

"No, I'm not."

"Then for what?"

He shook his head and seemed to have altogether forgotten the question when suddenly he answered, "Never mind. Now isn't the time to be talking about this."

“What time is it?”

“You'll see.”

CHAPTER 3

WE WERE in Florida before he said anything again and, even then, it was only to say, "Gas," before he pulled over and exited I-75. He'd do that: get real quiet for long stretches, be irritated if he was interrupted, asked something, told something, or in any way communicated with. If you watch him box, at least in my mind, there's the unmistakable likeness of a cat; all that quickness, cunning, and fierce mobility. But he's not just like that when he fights. He's moody like a cat too. Sometimes he's a burst of conversation and will ramble on and on about the topics that interest him. He'll also be playful and joke around too, don't get me wrong - it's not like he's some morbid presence that never smiles or laughs, but, like a cat, he's got his moods. All of this makes me perfect company, if you ask me. I can literally disappear with a book or something I'm reading and right then I was scouring through all the stuff I could find on Joel Arthur, so I took Abe's conversational disappearance in stride. As we rode, I read, relaxed and watched the flat, green south Georgia terrain give way to the Sunshine State.

We hooked over to highway 19 at some point (I wasn't paying attention) and rolled down the Gulf coast. Little nondescript towns came and went and I can't say that I had any feeling of affection for them. Consequently, as I looked around and wondered at the old Texaco's, Dollar Stores, sandy terrain with sun-beaten smallish trees, I puzzled over why so many found Florida to be a paradise. As we sat at a red-light in a little town, a sign told us that we were between Tallahassee, north to our right, and Tampa to our left. In hindsight, there were things missing from such a town. We saw the fast food chains. They were all there and accounted for just like they had been in the Georgia towns, South Carolina and North Carolina too. There was Subway and McDonalds and there was, of course, of course, a Wal-Mart. When you drive the back roads of America you know you're reaching civilization when you see the tell-tale big box sign with its accompanying parking lot so vast a plane could land in it. Yes, that's what we saw in every little town we passed through for over 500 miles. Everywhere was nearly the same. The same restaurants, the same stores... just the city names were changed. It makes you numb, if you ask me.

In the whole of it you'd be excused if you ever began to wonder where everyone worked for a living. Like I said, I see this more in hindsight now - especially after everything that's happened - but at the time there was this weird and nagging feeling of unease, as though things didn't quite add up. We'd roll through these towns, villages and small cities on our way, clear from Asheville to the Florida Gulf coast, and you'd think that all there was in America was retail and

food. We passed a few plants back in Georgia when Abe took the back roads around Atlanta. (Incidentally, Abe didn't talk much about God and metaphysical things but he did firmly believe that if he died with God angry at him he would be sent to the awful hell of having to endlessly drive Atlanta's perimeter.) Yet these plants were glaring exceptions. Just driving through the countryside, taking it all in on a quiet summer day, it would appear that as comfortable as we are, we've grown terribly dull. Every town relied on nature to differentiate it from others because it had nothing within its commerce or art to offer.

We eat and we shop. That's what the drive told me about us. And we worked at the places where we eat and shop.

Economics irritates me more than it confuses me.

Maybe that's why Abe gets so quiet.

Well, we drove down Highway 19 quite a ways toward Tampa and I marveled silently at how unlike Asheville the landscape was. Sure, the stores were nearly the same but that was all the two had in common. Western North Carolina soars above the earth; endless mountain peaks fill the eyes with gorgeous green delights at every turn this time of year; and the roads wind about in deference to those grand and wonderful mountains. Here there was the antithesis. All was flat, straight, dotted with pines and assorted palm trees, but nothing very much of interest. You knew there was water nearby and that was, as far as I was concerned, the only redeeming quality to be found in all of the state of Florida. Is that harsh? Well, bear with me. I haven't traveled much. Plus, in the Asheville area you can drive along and be massaged by the scenery - one soaring

vista after another - and when you reach a town or a gas station it's viewed with considerable irritation, as an interruption, a violation, an intrusion. When we passed a Walgreens or some other store here it was rather a welcome respite from the limitless monotony, and a rescue from a growing impatience.

If you're inclined to distrust the mountains, and I've heard of such effete souls out there, worrying about bears and feeling marooned because there isn't Chinese take-out, then I'm sure you scoff at my reaction to the Floridian paradise. And, on inspection, I may be overly critical because of the high expectations before coming here. True: the whole state isn't Miami Beach but I don't think that's what I was expecting. Furthermore, I will admit, in the name of fairness, that I've never much cared for the beach - blasphemous as that is to say in our Jimmy Buffett culture that sees a drink in hand, sand between the toes, and waves lapping on shore as the quintessence of human life. No, no...for me, a rocking chair on a porch on a mountain above a blissfully quiet and intensely green valley is the stuff of the good life.

Right after we turned off 19 to head to the island, a great and monstrously black cloud formed, wind picked up as if to announce a wrath of God type thunderstorm, and then, indeed, it started raining like it was trying to make up for lost time or something. Abe pulled over at this little dilapidated old gas station turned antique and pie shop. There was another car there with plates from Vermont. I went in and bought a piece of homemade sweet potato pie while Abe checked out the assorted antiques. The place was

fantastic, full of quirkiness, bad lighting, no emergency exits - just a rickety screen door up front and a narrow doorway leading to the back where the kitchen must be I presumed.

Speaking of presumption, I probably owe a correction since this type of place was exactly what I previously said didn't exist. Perhaps we hadn't looked hard enough.

This was awesome, though. I ate my pie, which was stunning, by the way, and joined Abe in looking around the store. He was playing around with an old rotary phone when I got back to him. He was smiling and shaking his head and dialing numbers.

"Ever have one of those?" I asked with pie in my mouth.

"Grew up with one."

"Mom probably couldn't afford a cell phone plan, could she?"

He really laughed.

"What? What?"

"There weren't always cell phones, man."

I knew that. I just wasn't thinking.

He patted my shoulder with a smile on his face, enjoying the moment for some reason. Putting the receiver down on the phone, he let his hand linger for a long moment, his long, dark fingers, and the pronounced knuckles atop a hand with powerful veins, straying on the back of the antique. A wistful look and the straying hand spoke words he didn't have to; he missed Mom and those tumultuous days of long ago when he at least had her despite our other deprivations. An empty refrigerator, and probably a phone that wasn't even connected, were pains that time had soothed and somehow turned into a sweet, melancholic

longing for what wasn't so good but was, nevertheless, gone. I could see this in his eyes and I knew that he knew one of life's simplest truths: that no matter what you have, nothing is so good when love is lost.

I followed him throughout the store, eating that delectable pie and nodding when he made comments, sighing when he sighed, and saying, "wow" or "interesting" when he went off about some artifact of yesteryear. Don't misunderstand me, please. I was fairly well interested in the old magazine collections - ten years worth of *Time* and *Sports Illustrated* - but certainly not to the depth that he was. He scoured through them all as the rain continued heavy outside. He took so long that I got a little bored, finished my pie and went back to the owner and ordered another. She was a mammoth black lady with crazy, unruly hair that jumped off her head in violent spasms. Obviously, she cared more about her pie than her appearance, which was fine with me. On the wall next to the door were copies of articles about her pie-making expertise. *The Tampa Tribune* called her the Bruce Lee of pie. That one really made me laugh. *The Ocala Star Banner*, *Gainesville Sun*, *Orlando Sentinel*, and *Jacksonville Times Union* had all done features on her. The black and white photos that accompanied the articles only featured either her pie or the wonderfully quirky storefront replete with the most unappetizing sign ever: ANTIQUE PIE.

Obviously, the big lady of the perfect pies had never gone to school for marketing or business or they would have hammered things like that right out of her.

But there I was at the counter, ordering another pie and chuckling at the realism of it all.

"Another piece just for you?" She said in an excitable and high-pitched voice. "Boy, you're gonna have to tell me where you packin' it. Ya all can't be no more than a hundred pounds."

"Can I have a piece of apple?"

"A whole pie?"

"Nah...just a piece."

"Boy, what's the matter with you. You see a piece of apple sittin' there?" She pointed below the glass counter with a heavy finger.

I shook my head.

"Then where you think a piece gonna come from?"

"You can't order by the slice?"

"Good God, child! What they teachin' you in those schools these days? You can if I already have the pie made but it's late now...I'll be fixin to close in another hour and ain't no way I'm gonna sell the rest of a pie."

"You mean that last piece was old?"

She looked at me with fury and before she could respond with a knife between my eyes or something of the sort, Abe walked up and said we'd take a whole pie.

"That's gonna take a while," she said over her shoulder as she walked back into the kitchen.

"That's okay. We're just waitin' the rain out and enjoying your company," Abe replied.

She stuck her head back out around the corner and smiled a grandmotherly smile in a kind of big, crazy lady sort of way.

We stood out on the front porch, under the low and sloping overhang, and watched the rain. It was cooler than when it started and the wind was whipping and spitting warm rain water at us, but it was still as sticky and muggy as a mountain boy can bear it. After all, I had spent the better portion of my life living in upstate New York, so I could far better handle a blizzard than one of these Dixie storms that raged on with a fury that seemed, well, almost unholy to me.

Across the street and all along the straight highway running to the island was monotonous grass, overgrown bushes that aspired to being trees and, from what I could tell, water that led out to the open sea. The highway too looked like it led a man off into the Gulf and either dumped him into it or let him go to Mexico or Texas. Either way we looked it was highway and rain running off into the humid, black sky.

"I miss New York," I said. He was looking at some old articles in a Sports Illustrated he bought when he paid for the pie and didn't reply, though I knew he heard me. I think he was sick of me complaining about everything and, come to think of it, I really hadn't said much that was positive in quite a long while. "That Sugar Ray Leonard?" I switched subjects.

"Yeah." He sat down in one of the old rocking chairs. It looked somewhat unsteady so he sat slowly, probing its trustworthiness before giving it his full weight. I did the same with the one across the front door from him and watched him look eagerly at the magazine.

"Isn't all that stuff online somewhere now?"

"I don't know. Maybe. But this is the pre-fight issue - Hagler-Leonard. This is classic. I've always wanted this one. Did you see the albums she had in there?"

"Albums? Really? Where...in the back? Cool." I got up and darted back in, leaving him to his reading. Inside I could smell the wondrous aroma of the big, crazy lady's kitchen and rummaged through her collection of LP's while listening to the rain fall on the metal roof. Pie in the oven, Abe on the porch reading, a sticky warm rain slowing down the day, and me with classic music at my finger tips - the only music I really liked - made me feel at home even though I never really had a true home. If my mother had lived, if she hadn't been broken by her addiction and the demons that preyed upon her, both from within and without, perhaps this is what I could have had as a child. Frankly, I don't think I thought of that when I was standing there looking through the classic albums, many never opened, enjoying the larger than life artwork, wondering what it must have been like to have lived in the era when a new album came out and you rushed it home, in a hurry to hear the scratch of the needle. No, I thought of that later, after everything happened and I remembered her and that warm, easy smell of perfection that she made in an old oven that was probably never meant for commercial use.

"Pie's ready in a little while, young man," she said, having waddled up behind me, taking a seat on the bench next to the window. The rain and cloud muted light coming in from outside softened her a little, I thought, and she didn't appear as imposing as when she was back up front in the shadows. "Ya listen to any of those ever?"

"Absolutely. But not too much on vinyl. I know the bands, though. I know the songs. I know most of these..." I was talking and flipping through them, pulling one up here and there. Foreigner, REO Speedwagon, Anne Murray, Boston, Gary Puckett, Elvis, John Denver. I pulled up Fleetwood Mac's Rumours and looked at Stevie on the cover. "I could listen to her all day. And look at her too."

"The witchy woman?"

"That's the Eagles."

She laughed. "She's too old for you, my boy."

"No...no, Stevie'll never get old...the things she sings about and the way she sings...timeless."

"You gonna buy it?" She asked after I'd looked at it for an unreasonable amount of time apparently.

"Nah. Wish I could. I don't have a record player. I worked part-time at a book place back home and don't make much. My brother has some money but he nixed the idea of spending a bunch on a good one - and he says the cheaper ones aren't worth it."

"Is that what you say?"

"Huh?"

"You don't buy it for that."

"Huh? What do you buy it for?"

"For your heart, my boy. For your heart."

Surprised, I looked at her and saw that she wasn't scary at all anymore, but quite gentle, comfortable with her world, and even a little wise.

"All these things are here to remind us that life isn't about the things, ya know."

"Then what else?"

“Memories. I sell what you’ve lost and help replace what time’s taken.” Then, suddenly, she let out a weird whoop and clapped her hands. “And until the Lord Jesus comes back and he wipes every tear away with those precious, precious fingers - Lordy Almighty - there’s just memories of times past.”

That was strangely profound. I didn’t know what to say, so I stood there silently and solemnly nodded as I figured the words and situation demanded. I started to slide the LP back into the stack but hesitated, looked back at her and searched her eyes. She was right. To let go would be to make the determination that I was a practical man and that’s all well and good except that being practical has the habit of practically killing a man’s soul. I could sense it as I let the slender, old cover slip along my fingers. A sudden terror gripped me - I’m sure she saw it, recognized it for what it was, because she smiled at me in a way that was unmistakable. She knew what I was thinking. If I let it go I was letting go of the hope of feeling this way again, and turning away from the dreams of innocence, music, family and life without fear, where I was in a place where there was nothing else to do, no distractions, and the days ambled by in artistic rhythms.

Standing there, hesitating, I started to understand that a man loses in little drips like this every day, every second - not necessarily in torrential downpours like outside.

I put it back but told her I’d return. She winked at me in a way that seemed to suggest she thought the conversation was more important than the album sale.

The highway leading to the key was impossibly long. I was left in a constant state of wonderment that anyone could ever have built something like this, clean out into the Gulf of Mexico. Abe remarked that Key West was an even greater engineering and road building feat. All I do is ponder and write and listen to music. It seems impossible that people know how to do things like this - and yet people drive everyday where there should be a wall of rock or a sea. The real trouble of modern life is how commonplace the miracles seem. Of course, that's just the way we are, I presume. We read a book in short order that took an author years to create; something an author toiled for, dreamt of, and suffered for, is brought to paper at last yet may reside on a shelf collecting dust from the sun of all four seasons, unread. That's our modern way: driving on highways and wandering through a world bestowed upon us - seeking amusements and meaning amongst the things we presume we deserve. And I caught myself thinking about how I was driving along a highway that, before men I never knew built it, had been someone's dream. Yeah. I'm driving along with my belly full of pie, riding the dreams and toil of the past.

Well, we drove into the Bernard's Key (as I was calling it) and quickly found the town and the main beach. There was absolutely no missing it, as the highway left you no place else to go.

A quaint little seaside village sat there at the end of the Florida highway, quietly sitting in the Gulf breezes. It had a main street that narrowed down after turning slightly off the state route. There was a small cinema, several restaurants, and assorted tourist looking shops scattered

across the street, past the ashen sidewalk and few trees. The street turned to cobblestone once we were in the heart of the shopping district. Late model cars were parked on both sides and there were no signs of great wealth. A small park was beyond the shopping area as the street wound around to the left and we saw a few picnic tables and palm trees offering scant shade from the intense sun. On the other side of the park there was a small beach, which was clean yet devoid of people.

Abe remarked that if we were in Myrtle Beach we'd be in bumper to bumper traffic. He was right. Bernard's town seemed only to have locals in it, and only a few at that. We were surprised even though we didn't quite know what to expect of the whole bizarre business we were engaged in but, upon inspection, we'd both naturally assumed that a Florida beach would be, well, crowded.

After surveying the shopping district/town, nearly surrounded on all sides by water, you got the impression that it was itself an island. The whole area was basically this way - pockets of land in the middle of the Gulf, with the main town or a few private residences filling the spaces left by the salt water. Everything was cramped, boxed in, and crowded because they had to make do with what nature gave them. Back home in the mountains this never occurs to you. The land appears limitless, eternal, at the service of our needs. This place corrected that false notion. We always have to work with what nature gives us.

When at last we came to Bernard's address, which was out past a few more cluttered sections of islands connected by roads one assumed could be easily washed away in a

storm, I was shocked at how it looked. If he were any ordinary old guy, who had worked his 40 years or so in an office, was an accountant or something of that order, the home would look pretty cool. It was surrounded by water, trees and brush rimming the view. Spanish moss, ubiquitous in Florida, draped the small, sickly looking trees dotting his uneven yard. I wasn't sure if I liked it; sometimes yes, but here it appeared to me that giant spiders had cast webs through the trees. Perhaps it was just my bias again, being a northern kid, one used to towering trees that grew high into the heavens, and stretched out all proud and green against the flawless sky. In Florida, the pines were dark green but the others weren't. They looked depleted by the heat, color draining from them like sweat pouring off of us in the humidity and were faded, like a TV losing its brightness and color.

His house stood three stories. There was no driveway. A dirt path led from the road to the home and there was tamped down grass where you could see that everyone parked. The house was white with green trim. The front porch was covered by the upstairs balcony, which ran across the entire front and wrapped around the side making the place appear somewhat circular. There were windows everywhere and the front porch, when we reached it, had brown rocking chairs with blue-and-white checkered cushions.

We were about to knock when we heard Bernard's booming voice from somewhere upstairs.

"Come right on in, fellas." There was unmistakable joy in his tone as that man never hid his emotions. "I'm coming

right down.”

Well, we opened the door and entered to find the living room to our right and a large, open kitchen on the left. A large whitish sectional sofa took up the bulk of the living room, stretching from where we were standing over to the far wall and curving towards the flat screen. It looked like a big upside down letter J. A small wooden table sat between it and the TV. The table was empty save for two thin, brown coasters adorned with sailboats. The wooden floor was covered by an off-white area rug. A large fan, kind of a tan color in line with the sofa and rug, spun directly above the living room and there was another across from it in the kitchen. A doorway separated the rooms parallel to the front door.

The walls of the living room were so light a green as to be almost colorless. Oddly, right past the doorway leading off down a hall, the kitchen wall was brick. Black stool type chairs dotted the long kitchen counter on the living room side and the rest was black granite tops with old, white cabinets. The oven and refrigerator were new and stainless steel. Abe and I looked at each other and shrugged. There was no sitting area in the kitchen, only open hardwood floor. We put our bags down and walked across the open space and I looked out the two glass doors. They led out to the side deck where there was a bar with tall white chairs and a grill behind it, and several flimsy plastic chairs around a glass table.

Abe opened the door and stepped out. Following him, I saw a long deck curve down through the trees and brush to the water where a gazebo stood. It looked as though an old

Samurai had made it. It was all red and had benches along the inside and steps going down the back to the water where maybe there was a boat dock, but I couldn't tell.

"What do you have in your extra suitcase?" I asked Abe as we looked off at a small structure in the water. It was old, standing on stilts in the water, and a blue and white row boat was parked in front of it. I thought I heard music from that direction.

"What do you have in those journals that you keep?"

"Fair enough. But you have a lock on it."

"So?"

"You afraid of a billionaire and his family stealing from you?"

"I've never stolen anything in my life," Bernard said from behind us, stepping out the door. "Except for a newspaper from a neighbor when I was a young, young man."

He walked up and joined us, patting us jubilantly on the back as a way of greeting.

"You stole a newspaper?"

"I was broke. I'm not proud of myself. I wasn't hungry like a lot of folks. I could go a day or two without eating much. Still do, in fact. But news...I needed to know...always needed to know what was going on. And, man was I broke. I'd just gotten back from overseas and was out of the military. I'd saved all my money while in the Corps. Seriously. They fed me and housed me. Other guys blew their money. For me it was blood money. I could've - and would have - died for that. That's the bargain a man makes with his country. I'll kill your enemies or die trying. You pay me and feed me and take care of me."

"How patriotic," I said.

"Patriotism had nothing to do with it, son. I was young and had nowhere to go. I grew up one of seven to dirt poor parents. Thought maybe I'd box my way out of it like so many greats did - like Dempsey, Tunney, Louis..."

"What happened?"

"Other men wouldn't stop hitting me," he laughed, "and I realized that I didn't have those intangibles like you have. I had heart but heart without timing and skill - in boxing - leads to brain damage. I joined the Marines instead."

"Why get punched when you can get shot," Abe said.

"Ha! Right. Well, that's it. I traded four of my years for this. That was my chance. My government had enemies - commies - and I learned that they were evil sons-a-bitches, so that worked out pretty well. Got a chance to shoot some real bad men and when I left I had money saved up. I came to Florida and rented a room from an old lady for \$20 a month...including three meals a day. She was happy because I never ate much." He laughed.

"And you stole her newspaper?"

"No," he waved his arms as if to blow the thought away, "certainly not. I worked a few blocks away at a printing press and walked past this guy's house every day. He had all the locals delivered."

"You were working full-time, had virtually no expenses... how'd you end up so broke that you couldn't afford a paper?"

"Well, I could have but I saw a big headline and really wanted to read it. I didn't have money that day because I was investing everything in real-estate. Every dime. I

wanted that paper because it had a story about a big development plan for the beaches. I swore I wouldn't spend money I didn't need to spend so I ended up in that conundrum. Plus, I was upset that day and maybe a little desperate because I'd been losing money and it'd been five years of investing and waiting - all the while having to work every hour I could. I was pushing 30, living in a rented room..."

"An American Raskolnikov," I joked.

"Pardon."

"Never mind. Go on."

"As soon as I took it I felt it...that hole in my gut. I'd reasoned it out that way in my mind - that I was working so hard, had nothing, might lose it all anyway, despite my greatest attempts at thrift and industry, and this guy had a nice car and house. That's what did it. I lost my honor for the price of a newspaper and it happened because I felt sorry for myself and envied the neighbor."

I noticed that Abe had stopped looking at the water and was instead focused on Bernard.

"That was the only day in the seven years that I worked for the printing press that I ever missed a day or called in sick. I was crushed. Crushed. And I thank God that I was, ya know? I left early and went back and sat on that guy's front step in the heat and sweated and waited. He was a doctor. His wife came home from wherever she was and she was scared at first. I explained the story. I think I even cried and I don't think I ever cried since then until just a little while ago. No...pretty sure...except maybe when Roger Staubach retired."

He laughed and laughed whereas we just chuckled. It didn't bother him. Also, I had no idea who the Roger guy was, so I figured we were even.

"I told her that I'd pay her back and I kissed her hand. It was a simpler day back then." He sighed and watched the still water. "I've never forgotten it. Never will. Never should."

"Why'd you tell me all that?" Abe asked, his face a shade of pink from the light of the setting sun.

I was positive that I heard music coming from the glorified shack out in the water and thought I might recognize who it was but it was too faint for me to zero in on.

Bernard put his hand on Abe's shoulder and looked him squarely in the face. He was maybe an inch shorter and had to look slightly up at him.

"Honor's important to me, son. I know you come from a tough background. I've read about you...admire you. You're a man that believes in doing the right thing even when it costs you. There aren't many like you in this world anymore precisely because your generation doesn't know that honor is the most important possession a man has. I didn't get where I am because I had connections. I got here because I worked my ass off, saved, invested, and waited. Comfort was never the thing. Doing it right was. When I first read about you, about what you did, and saw that your talent matched your character, I said to myself, 'Self, that's a man I'd like to meet someday.'"

Abe said nothing but you could tell he was skeptical, which is to say he was basically as he always was. He was

an old soul, full of sadness and melancholy because he'd been burned in the world of boxing and in the business of life by trying to protect Mom from herself. But the protection of one's character has to be an inside job; no man masters the discipline of imparting the wisdom of life upon one that resists. So, he stood there looking back at Bernard, not saying anything and I noticed that this had the effect of making Bernard just a bit disappointed. You could tell that he wanted Abe to believe in him, to trust him. For some reason that was important to the old man. Weirdly, even comically, I had the strange impression that Bernard was dating Mom, they were getting serious, and he was out here trying to get us to accept him. I laughed at the thought and found myself again struggling to hear the song floating across the water. It was frustrating.

Bernard gave up on this pursuit and I felt a little sorry for him. I mean, the guy was dying and he was trying to reach out to us. Abe was that way, though, and right then it irritated me that he couldn't have simply smiled and put a congenial, brotherly arm around the guy's frail shoulder. He's tougher than me - and I mean that emotionally. I'm all out there, wide-open. Abe is always behind his jab, hands up, just out of range, careful, probing. He lives like he boxes: with great care, precision, clarity, and sense of purpose. These qualities of his, forged through the fires of his trials, and of being a man so that I could be a boy, were quite integrated into the fabric of his character. Plus, I know that Bernard's words must have penetrated quite deeply into his heart because I know how passionately he cherishes the concept of honor. Bernard was the first

person I ever heard speak aloud of it other than Abe, so it was surprising to watch him stand there and study the old guy, presumably suspecting that he was being set up.

Well, he brought us back into the house and showed us our rooms. I was surprised that we were actually staying in the house. Abe got a room with a king sized bed, a wall of windows looking out to the music filled cabin on the water, and a nice little balcony. Mine had one big window but no direct access to the balcony, which was a bummer but was still an upgrade from the small room in a dilapidated house I'd lived in for so long back in New York. In the room I had my choice between identical single beds that looked, frankly, like short dressers with a mattress on top, being that there were two rows of three drawers below the mattress. There wasn't a closet or anything else in the room, not even a mirror. Everything was sparse and empty of personality - a Spartan room of necessity that no thought or human warmth had touched. I put my stuff in the drawers and left my suitcase and bag on the bed along the far wall.

After being together in the truck for the day, except for our pie and antique stop, Abe and I took some time apart. He went off to see the rest of the property with Bernard. I could hear them talking as they walked off towards the rear of the area, which was to the left side of the house. There were a few out buildings and one of them was rather large. It looked like it could be a hangar for a small plane. One of the other two might be a garage and the last one looked like a separate living quarters. Abe would see to all that like he always does.

For my part, I was drawn back down to the Asian looking gazebo by the water. I walked out the back door by the kitchen again, headed down the weathered walkway, ducking my head below a branch that was drooping in the humid evening, and took a seat on the bench. The sun was beginning to set off to my right. I watched the shack and still heard music, carried on a soothing Gulf wind, and my heart was heavy with anticipation. I was eager and couldn't discern why - my emotions a mystery to me, much like the whole island and Bernard Tucker himself. There was mystery to the whole place, especially the little room on stilts ahead of me in the water, facing away toward the setting sun, which was dipping, dropping and shedding orange, pink and purple light across the world and into my consciousness. I was sitting there in a time of technology and communication, yet alone, with nothing to do but look at the water, the glorious, color bursting sky, and wonder if she was in that odd place. I still heard music, but that was all.

Suddenly I realized the music had stopped and saw someone moving along the side of the shack. I'm not sure which was perceived first, the movement or the cessation of melody as my thoughts were carrying me away from the place at that moment. But, yes, there was someone out there. They'd exited from the front, walked around the side, which was no more than a few steps at most, climbed down a short ladder to a small platform and stepped into the boat.

That was my first sight of her.

I'd like to tell you that I knew she was there and that's why I eschewed the company of Abe and Bernard and opted to sit alone, but often in cases as such, it's hard to say precisely what drives us right at the moment. Bernard never said anything about her being there at the time, only that he expected the rest of his family tomorrow for their annual summer sojourn to the island. That was all the information I was going on and yet I knew - or maybe just fervently hoped, and that hope, so ardent, was mistaken as innate knowledge. Yes, that's possible if you'd prefer to be all logical about it, although I prefer to say that on a deep level, past the senses, in the realm where the heart and the desires that are sweet and pure and lovely live, I felt her presence.

My introduction to her was by way of watching her row to me in the gloriously varied light of the setting sun. I watched her dark hair blow behind her in the wind. Her arms worked steadily, evenly, gently. She rowed without hurry, without force, with an easy skill that seemed to have been practiced for a lifetime in its naturalness. She drew closer and I could see she was wearing a thin summer dress, purple with soft white flowers dotting it like scattered snow flakes. It was short, just above her knees and as she rowed her thin waist and...well, you get the idea of what I noticed. She was perfection. Let's leave it at that. She kept rowing, drawing closer to me, and I was enraptured with the vision of her. Only Sam could improve a sunset. Time didn't move; it waited for us on that winsome eve full of magic and grace.

There was no apprehension, no fear, just a dream floating toward me on sheer, calm water. Her oars touched the Gulf, descended in peace, and pulled the boat without haste or ambition and came back up again. She was looking at me the whole way. I could feel those dreamy brown eyes, coming steadily closer, searching for me, upon me in the sun's fading, tired light, long before I saw them. When I met her gaze at last, I saw that there was sadness in those eyes that seemed to know a longing and a despair unspoken. She stepped up when she reached the gazebo, looking at me without worry or pretense. She wore knee-high black socks, which were a shade darker than her hair and eyes, and dark combat boots. Save for the white flowers dotting the dress, which were fairly well lost to sight in the dimming light, Sam was all purple and black, but the black wasn't disconsolate or grave, you see, because she brightened every little thing she touched and, on her, black was thoughtful, striking, smooth, and innocently sexy, rather than morose, or heavy, or lightless. She couldn't ever be anything but lovely, my Sam and I'm happier and more protective of nothing more in my entire life than this memory of her in that boat on that first night, draped in shadow and the sun's orange glow.

"You're Charlie."

I nodded and noticed that her eyes looked red. She'd been crying. Before we got there, Bernard had told her that he was dying.

"Get in," she turned back and sat down. Her voice was that of a little girl and a woman's too. It's hard to describe.

Anyway, I complied without question and stepped down to the platform and then uneasily to the boat. "Can you row?"

We switched spots, passing wonderfully close and I almost fell because I was unsteady and yet afraid to touch her but she reached out and put a hand on my shoulder and the touch proved that this was no dream at all, as I was fearfully wondering. She didn't wear perfume but the sweet smell of her shampoo, fresh and feminine, filled the air. In the back of her hair was what looked like a feather and it was pink, white and yellow. And her hair reached the middle of her back, perfect as anything out there that evening - the calm, dark water, the tired sun, the puffy gray clouds turning to soft black masses along the limitless horizon, and even the lovely breeze, caressing us and whirling around like gentle kisses from heaven.

People speak of such loveliness by comparing it to that of angels. But Sam can't be compared to an angel because angels exist in perfection, don't they? Is there an ugly angelic being? You see, in our world where there is both ugliness and, worse, mediocrity and banality, such a beauty has a greater power than an angel would in heaven. To be so feminine without pretense, without effort, just to be natural and beautiful and sweet and sexy, and to have a voice that sings while speaking, is to show the world by your presence that God is a God of beauty and grace. This is why God made women, I tell you. And, trust me, I'd never thought of that until that very moment I watched her in the fading light and rowed in silence toward whatever it was I was rowing to. I trusted her immediately, implicitly, and couldn't imagine a danger coming forth from such a figure

of inexpressible felicity and beauty. Instantly, I was of the mind that whoever could hurt such a woman as this, whoever could not instantly and completely comprehend what was the height and depth of her simplicity and art, was in danger of a great perdition, for their soul was indubitably dead to all that was innocent, lovely, and good in the world.

I rowed and watched her. Sleepy and clearly saddened, she didn't look at me much, and when she did a sweet smile was her answer to my intense scrutiny. Yes, she returned my fascinated and worshipful stare with a short, though, from all appearances, sincere smile. Instead of talking, she looked around at everything - at the moon far up in the darkening sky, growing more light and defined with every wet pass of the oars. It seemed to me that she was taking mental pictures of it all; she'd stare off at something and then, in a start, would blink and shake her head as a woman trying to stay awake. There was, indeed, a remarkable calm all around her. She was a soul that was worthy of nature's best, like this night, clear, warm and wind blessing us as I rowed.

By the time we reached the shack, atop its wooden legs, criss-crossing underneath, badly in need of renewal, and, at least as I saw it, in danger of being one more storm from being relegated to slipping below the surface, just another wreckage swallowed by the hungry sea. The oceans did that quite well, thank you. They made mincemeat of man's plans.

Without a word spoken, when we docked, she was content to sit a moment in the moon's growing light, her

sleepy eyes full of weariness and something else hidden I hoped she'd tell me about soon.

"I'm Sam," she said, content to sit there and look off into the black water. She seemed to speak more to the water, and to the night, than to me.

"How'd you know my name?"

"I'm psychic."

"You're making fun of me."

"No. Tuck told me."

"Tuck? Your grandfather."

"I got here early today. Drove through the night. I'm glad I did. I'd rather hear it like this."

"About him being sick?"

"About dying, yes. He told me about you."

"Oh, great." If she called me Lusty, I swear I would have rowed back and slapped the old guy.

"He told me how much you liked my photos."

"Oh...yeah...your stuff is great."

"Let's go meet my boyfriend."

She stood up slowly, grabbing the ladder next to the boat and pulled herself up and onto the deck. Then, she grabbed some rope that had been beside her on the bench and used it to tie the boat to the dock.

There is nothing I can write that's equal to the devastation that swept over me at that moment. She'd said that in a weird tone, one different from the one she'd been using but, not knowing her at that point, and her way of things, I couldn't discern the moment. Did she really row out to get me simply so that she could pulverize my deepest aspirations so nonchalantly? Seriously, seriously...knocking

me in the head with one of the oars and throwing me to the ocean floor, to be food for the fish or whatever appetite wanted me, was more popular an option for me than having to go inside and see the man that had what I so ardently wanted. The sweetest agony pierced my heart, one that only a romantic trampling can produce - a pain depthless, severe and yet poignant at once. Still in the boat, I looked up at her, her thin dress pressed perfectly against her in the wind that was always blowing across the water.

"You wear boots all summer long." I heard myself say. I don't know why this came to mind.

"I guess I'm never ready for the winter," she replied, singing her reply softly in a sweet and pure voice that was like water running through my hand, clean, refreshing, and lingering even after it was gone.

We looked at each other, in moonlight and mystery, the water lapping against the boat, rocking me gently.

"Your makeup looks great," I said, not singing it because my voice would ruin the moment and probably scare the fish to death.

She looked at me with both puzzlement and delight and I thought she might cry. I heard the song in my head, heard it as though it had flown in upon the ocean breezes. It just came on from wherever it had been in my memory from years ago, like the Nightbird of the song and was there when we both needed it.

"C'mon." She reached out her hand. It was the first time I touched her and I thought to myself that it was a special, signature moment, not to be passed over, not to be treated with indifference or relegated to the supposed regularity of

everyday life. Samantha wasn't the regular or common. I knew that as clearly and as comprehensively as I knew anything. Her hand extended to me was more than just that physical act; I could see it in those blissfully brown eyes. She was inviting me into her world. Today, where images of women's bodies are flaunted everywhere, when music videos could be confused with porn, and where meaningless sex is ubiquitous, I bless the heavens that I saw this for what it was.

When I reached for her it was as though I was reaching across worlds, stretching even from earth to heaven. Slowly, like a subtle ripple of water rolling under the boat and heading to the distant shore, my hand moved toward hers and when we touched our hands didn't hurry to close. We stayed like that, hand-in-hand, for a moment and then I stood and stepped up next to her.

We were close enough to kiss. She turned and walked around the back of the shack. I followed until we walked in the door. It was but one room. I closed the door behind us and she turned on a lantern that was battery powered and sitting on a shelf. It gave off enough light to make the whole room rather bright but she only turned it up slightly and it was as soft moonlight shining inside. Across the room there was a mattress with no frame against the wall, right on the floor. I couldn't make out the weird patterns in the light and she had thin lacy curtains hanging around it. Another lantern like the one on the shelf was on the floor next to the mattress. A folded blanket with a pillow was next to the lantern.

She walked to the other end of the room where there was a small table with an old record player on it. There was that guitar leaning against the wall. Above that was a painting of a lion resting in tall grass, a hazy mountain range stretched out in the distance against a sky all gold and blue and purple. Along the floor around the table and record player were baskets that she later told me had been hand weaved in Charleston. They were of several different sizes that she put to varied use. One, large and square, housed her LP's. She went to take one out and put it on. As she did I looked around in confusion and hope, for there were no adjoining rooms and nowhere for a boyfriend to be hiding. She readied the album and I could hear the needle gliding and then the bass and drum and piano.

"Dance with me," she said and, before I could even think about it, we were dancing there in the middle of the room to Mr. Perry's beauty and soulful tenor. There were windows on every side of us, open and letting in the steady, romantic wind. She nestled her head between my shoulder and cheek, her breasts against me, one hand resting against the bare skin of my neck, the other slightly below that one.

I don't think I moved much. To hold her at that time, like that...I kept hoping the song would never, never end because after that one she would assuredly stop to change the album because the next song was utterly incongruous to slow dancing. My hands were on the small of her back and I worked up the nerve not to keep them clasped but to open them against her, to press her gently and pull her closer. I rested my head sideways against hers and breathed in deep, wondrous, soothing breaths as though I

was a man that had everything he ever wanted in all the world and, you know, right then, I think I did.

The only thing that made it imperfect were my own worries. I admonished myself for not showering when I arrived earlier and silently wondered if I reeked of mothballs from the antique shop. Or, perhaps, I still smelled like pie, which also wasn't exactly romantic unless the woman you were dancing with was obese or something. Oh, and I worried that I wasn't tall enough too. If I was taller she could have rested her head comfortably against my chest rather than on my bony shoulder. But, of course, even if that were the case, my chest was basically just as bony as my shoulder so that would be no good either. Ah, the madness!

I succeeded in chasing those petty anxieties by remembering Abe talking about having to do the same thing when boxing. Just be in the moment, he'd say. Well, that's what I did. We swayed in each other's arms and this woman I'd just met (was time still moving?) was all of the world to me, the culmination of everything I wanted right in my trembling but hopeful embrace. We danced in that winsome melody, singing of love's sweet fires as it did, and I was amazed and so very pleased that it was truly just the song for the occasion as it implored the beloved lady to simply stay awhile. Such a simple desire in this world of complexity, cruelty, business and politics. But we had each other on that night, and we had the words of poets sung by a voice coveted by God's own angels, moonlight, the ocean's sweet breeze, and a melody full of soul and beauty.

Abe could go ahead and seek his billion dollars and whatever it was he thought it would secure for him. In her arms, I was sure I'd never want another thing, never need another thing - except for the eradication of all my fear, which, I presumed, love would drive out.

When the song stopped, Sam turned away and went back to the old record player. I stood there looking at her and thought of how quickly perfection gave way to that fear I knew was coming. I feared not holding her again. I feared that this was but a fleeting moment, lost as the sweetest dream is lost upon awakening reluctantly in a new morning to the dread and aloneness that is knowing what is so deep is also unreachable. To have her near, and to have her in my arms, only brought home the dread worry that it would all pass away.

She put another album on. Stevie Nicks' *Wild Heart* played and we shared a little melancholic chuckle. We sat on the floor in the middle of the room, reclining on the assorted cushions and pillows she had scattered about. She hugged a large stuffed lion to her chest and curled up all cute like a little girl. The lion looked sad, like her.

We talked sparingly although there was so much I could have said. Tonight was a night just for music and togetherness.

"I needed you here tonight," she said. "I'm using you. I know. And I'm sorry...but Tuck told me about you and how you were...how sweet."

She stroked the lion's head, smoothing its fur with her fingertips.

"Tuck dying...I've always dreaded it. I've taken photos for so many years because I was surrounded by too much love - you know, like she says in the song - and I didn't want to let it go, was afraid something would happen to make it go away. One night, a few years ago, I sat right here looking at some of the old photos. I cried for hours because everything was passing and the sea wasn't changing but we were and my work could never quite explain or stop that."

"You cried all night because you couldn't stop time?"

She shook her head. "I cried all night because my work couldn't protect the things I loved."

"Protect them from what?"

She smiled and for the first time I saw an expression from her that reminded me of her grandfather. "You're as sweet as he said you were - as innocent. How'd you do it, Charlie? How'd you get here intact?"

I shook my head, didn't know how to answer and didn't know where her reference point was or how my question made me a mystery. We're always fairly obvious to ourselves, as it goes.

"How'd you grow up with a brother that hurts people, lives in violence, and end up like this?"

"Weak?"

"Honest."

"Abe's not violent. Not in the way you think."

Well, I lost my direction at that point. She was looking at me with those sad and sleepy eyes, not judging me, but accepting and even loving me while still shaking her head in disbelief at something I couldn't understand. I should have followed up on the question of protection but I got lost in

the pleasure of being with her. She got up a few times and danced a little as she changed albums but mostly we sat like that, curled up on the floor, talking in broken conversations that came and went like the waves and wind outside. She put the Sundays on and I thought Harriet's singing voice was almost like her - Sam's - speaking voice. She laughed and shook her head in tired amazement that I even knew who the Sundays were. "I'm so glad you're here, Charlie," she said. "God knew I couldn't take this night by myself."

At some point, as the night went on timelessly, we fell asleep.

CHAPTER 4

I DON'T REMEMBER THE SUNDAYS' album ending. I awoke because it was getting warm. The sun was up and the shack was filled with fresh morning light. There must have been all sorts of birds on the roof as I heard constant pitter-patter and wings fluttering and flapping.

Sam was asleep on the mattress behind me, still hugging her stuffed lion. I watched her for quite a while until thirst and having to go to the bathroom drove me to wake her. I tapped her foot and she didn't budge. I shook it more forcefully and still nothing. Finally, I knelt down beside her and put a hand on her shoulder, shook her once, then again, and on the third try she looked at me. Frankly, I was afraid that she wouldn't recognize me at all, would scream, and I'd end up getting arrested. I'd never spent the night with anyone before. This was all unbelievably, enchantingly new to me.

"There's no bathroom here," I said apologetically.

"You can pee off the side over there," she motioned to the left front, which was hidden from the gazebo and the rest of shore for all intent and purposes.

I made a face.

"I won't peek," she said and rolled over.

I hadn't brought my phone or a watch and there was no clock in our nest. Not knowing the time we'd fallen asleep or the time now was strange and made the day seem even more surreal than it already was. Sam fell right back to sleep and I could tell, unlike Abe who was usually up at daybreak, to take a run or do whatever it was he did that was responsible and Spartan, that she was no early riser. I felt weary, yet excited and couldn't settle back down. After a little while I relented and did my morning business off the side, which made me think that the whole first night romance thing was officially over; the sun had risen and I was peeing in public.

I rummaged through her records to kill some time because I didn't have the nerve to go over and lie next to her. We had an intimacy last night, sure, but it wasn't quite physical and the doubts and hesitations that should have plagued me constantly last night took hold for good now. So much of that momentum, romantic mystery, and pure honesty was fueled by her and with her sleeping, I realized that I didn't know where I stood. I mean, I did...she said it... she was heartbroken and needed someone. I was someone. I knew all this on one level but I was a mess anyway.

A large boat had come in overnight and was parked out past the gazebo - or docked, if that's what you call it - around the other side of the property. I guess it was a yacht, though I can't say that I actually know the difference between a really large, expensive boat and a yacht or if there is, in fact, a difference.

Well, after what must have been another hour or so of bumbling around, watching the water, reading liner notes (which was pretty cool), and staring at Sam (even more cool), I finally walked over and joined her on the bed on the floor. Passing through the lacy curtains I eased down as gently as I could and put a tenuous, hopeful hand on her hair, letting my fingers get lost, slowly, elatedly. She turned, her back having been towards me, and cuddled into the pillow and my arm. I was ever so grateful that she hadn't jumped to her feet and asked me what the hell I was doing, or kicked me in the groin and blasted me with Mace. Then, I stroked her hair back across her forehead and her dark eyebrows looked hopelessly perfect to me, smooth and black against her light skin.

Suddenly, in a start, she popped up and looked out the open window and saw the big white yacht. She sighed and made a face.

"What?"

"My Mom and Dad are here."

"In that?"

"Yep." She went and gathered up her boots, sat back on the bed and started to put them on. "C'mon, let's go to town and get some breakfast."

"Um, okay," I said weakly and followed suit, putting my sandals back on.

"I can't deal with them right now. Maybe tomorrow."

"You don't wanna see your family? I thought the whole family came down here every year in August for vacation and hung out."

She stood up with an irritated grunt. "Not in the way you think, Charlie. C'mon. I'm hungry. We'll talk in the boat. I'll row. It'll be faster."

We went around the shack and headed the other way, away from the house and the yacht. She said there was a great place for waffles right near the beach. I could see the road we came in on yesterday as she rowed and we wound around past a curve in the island and then I could see the beach and the downtown ahead. It was a pretty good distance though and I was happy that she was rowing because I certainly wasn't used to exercise like that.

"Who's on the yacht exactly?"

"Just my mom and dad. Grandma died ten years ago. I was never as close to her as I was to Tuck. I'm Tuck's little girl," she said with a wistful smile. "I've come here every year since I was too little to remember - and I begged to. Mom and Dad don't come here like I do."

"Huh?"

"Well, they stay in their yacht...or they get a hotel. They don't stay in the house with Tuck. They haven't as long I can recall."

"Why not?"

"It's not good enough for them."

"Really? That's sad, man."

"Tuck told me about you when he told me about the fight. He said that I'd like you and told me how you seemed totally out of place back at his office in Atlanta. He said you were like me...that you didn't seem like a materialist."

"I worked at a bookstore in Asheville. I'm a book guy."

She smiled and watched me. The sun was at my back and she squinted a little in the light. As for me, I had the best view in the world: clean, blue water under a spotless sky, and Sam.

"But your brother's here for the money."

I shrugged and felt uncomfortable. "Not like that," I said. "It's not like that. Abe's got his own reasons."

"And? What are they?"

"Ya have to ask him, I guess."

"Well, I'm sure he's got a billion reasons."

"The better question is why is your grandfather putting this whole thing on in the first place?"

She laughed and said, "You wouldn't know that, would you?"

"Know what?"

"Well, it's complicated, okay, and it has a lot to do with those people on the yacht back there."

"Your parents?"

"Yep."

She didn't want to talk about it until we sat down to eat. It was a short walk across the beach, down a rickety walkway and around the corner. Her father's boat was out of sight from where we sat, which seemed to have been her plan or, in the least of it, a happy coincidence. When we got in a middle-aged waitress brought us out on a covered deck to our seat - two plastic chairs and a square wooden table with a metal napkin dispenser on it. She went off to the ladies room and was gone for a few minutes. When she came back I'd already ordered for both of us. She wanted the French toast, water and orange juice. I had thought of

getting eggs or something but she was fairly convincing in her sale of the French toast so I got that and added the eggs as a side. I would have ordered coffee but it was already hot out - it was a few minutes past eleven - and the trip across the water, with the sun beating down on us like we were two eggs in a frying pan, then pulling the boat up on the beach, and walking over here had all contributed to me being too hot. Plus, I was a little worried that I'd get sunburn since I was never out this much, I'm sad to report. She was tanned and ready for the weather. I was wearing cargo shorts and a short-sleeved polo that was a little too thick to be comfortable while absorbing the summer sun.

As she walked back to the table, I happily enjoyed the sight of her. Her hair was a little slept-in, as it was, but that didn't matter at all because her look, and her tremendous charm, was all about her simplicity. I had sort of dated a girl a few years back and she was in the bathroom for an hour every morning and wouldn't be seen in public unless she'd met that exact quota. Despite those vain exertions, she was nowhere close to Sam's simple perfection. It was all about knowing who you were; she was as comfortable and as carefree as a little girl, devoid of insecurity or a desire to be anything other than what she was. This, I think, was the heart and soul of her look, if I may even use that word.

"What?" She puzzled over the way I was looking at her.

"Ah, well..."

"Speak all the truth to me, Charlie, or don't speak to me at all. No secrets. If you want secrets, go get on the yacht. Secrets are safe there because no one talks...no one's real."

"You're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

I couldn't believe I said that to her face. In no past circumstance was I ever quite so bold with a woman - especially not one I found attractive. In such past cases I was always relegated to near stuttering, searching for an intelligible thing to say and always looked like an awkward, dimwitted, geek. But in Sam's presence it was suddenly natural to say what was on my mind.

"Honey," she leaned her elbows on the table and put her chin in her left hand, those brown eyes dancing in the bright sunlight, "you're unbelievably sweet."

She didn't say that the way a woman would that thought of you as her romantic ideal.

"And you're not saying that because you're horny, are you?"

I just about choked on my juice.

"No. You're not like that. Oh, listen...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you. It's okay. It's okay." She said, hurrying to change the subject. "But you seem surprised that I'm..."

"Beautiful?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's all just surreal to me," I admitted. "I've never had a night with a woman. Not like that and not the other way either."

She reached across the table and took my hand, started to say something but the waitress brought the food just at the moment her lips began to part. Instead of whatever thought she was about to convey, she gave me a smile that was more than a smile - it was a way of telling me that I wasn't her boyfriend but was something much deeper than

a friend. Somehow, I'm still not sure how, Sam was able to impart this to me in that generally sad but uncommonly tender smile. She had such a way of doing that - of looking at you and moving you, and seeing you heart-to-heart.

She started on her French toast and I followed suit as I was positively famished at that point.

"As for my parents and the fight and the money," she started while slicing her breakfast into syrupy sections. "My grandfather's got his own reasons...reasons I don't fully agree with..."

"Such as?"

It was Abe who asked this question. He had arrived completely unnoticed by me because, well, I was so focused on Sam at that point that a rhinoceros could have snuck up on me and absconded with my orange juice without me noticing. He stood over her shoulder and smiled at her, then at me.

"I'm sorry to intrude but I was wondering where my little brother had run off to."

"Pull up a chair," I said, more excited that he was there than annoyed that he'd shattered the intimacy of our breakfast.

"By all means. It's great to actually have a chance to talk to you, Abe Johnson."

He took her hand and I thought that for a second he might kiss it but he just bowed slightly and then sat down in a chair he pulled over from another table. "Likewise, Ms. Tucker. It's nice to see you again."

"You've met?"

He looked at me and shrugged and said, "Sort of...not exactly...she came into the office back in Atlanta after you went downstairs. We saw each other is all."

"You didn't mention it," I said in the way a man might scold someone for omitting mention that he'd seen the risen Christ or something. Or Elvis.

He smiled at me, then said to her, "I'm a great admirer of your photography."

"Thanks," she said, not bothering to stop eating. "I can't say the same about you, though."

"Not a boxing fan?"

She shook her head and made a face, which I thought was utterly adorable. I didn't say anything because I was enjoying the fact that Abe had a chance to see that I was with a woman like Samantha. I'm sure that he knew, intuitively, and the way a man knows that it doesn't snow in Miami, that we hadn't had sex last night but just the knowledge that I was out all night made me feel an odd pride. I felt like a man and less like his adolescent little brother. I felt like I came out of his shadow by maybe an inch or more.

"I photograph what's too gentle and precious to last. I photograph moments to steal them back from time's inexorable march. That's my art...to save a little of the beauty of the world that passes silently every moment. I take them because what I see around me is always too much and it breaks my heart to let it go. Yet too much passes anyway. That's the whole of my existence, Abe Johnson. What's the whole of yours...to hit people and make obscene money doing it?"

He smiled at her playfully, leaned back in his seat and raised his hands to his head, clasping them there. Even in repose his arms and shoulders were fantastically muscled. He was wearing a baggy tank-top, black with a white boxing glove on the front with "New York Boxing Club" written above the old-fashioned glove.

"The beauty of the world can't survive without someone that can fight," he replied.

"Well, aren't you full of yourself?"

"You're the one that introduces yourself as the keeper of beauty."

She sighed. "You think you defend beauty by beating other men senseless?"

"No."

She ate and watched him, waiting for elaboration just as I was too. But Abe sat there, content with himself and smiling at both of us in an irritating way. It really got to her.

"Just no? That's all you're going to say?"

"You've already made up your mind, so there's not much use in me arguing with you about it."

"Who said we're arguing? I'd just like to hear how you figure that boxing is somehow, someday a defense of art. You've got my attention on that one."

"You've got a rough few days ahead of you, Samantha. Your dad is here. I had a chance to meet him this morning. And Bernard is ill."

Her face tightened and she put her fork down.

"I'm sorry," Abe said.

Sam nodded and took a deep, slow breath.

"I just don't think that you're ready to hear what I have to say," Abe said.

She flashed him a look of disbelief and semi-contempt.

"You patronize me? What happened? Did you have a nice little chat with my father and he told you all about how unrealistic I am? How out-of-touch?"

"Never came up."

"How'd you know we were here?" I asked.

"I saw you guys rowing off from the shack."

"Oh."

"And I figured you were going for something to eat. Anyway, where'd the shack come from?"

"I dunno," Sam replied with reluctance, a little irritated. "Dad said that grandma told him once that Tuck built it when they were first married and he had called it the honeymoon shack. Tuck says it was here when he bought it."

"Your dad says it's unsafe."

"Well, that's my dad's job, right? To look out for the little guy by suing the bejabbers out of everyone and then sailing around in a yacht he bought with the money. He won't stay in the house. He and mom think it's beneath them. *Ah, the furniture is ugly! Why don't they hire an interior designer?*"

Abe laughed. "Well, I must say...it's surprising that he doesn't live..."

"In opulence?"

Abe nodded. I did too.

"Well, that's the thing to know about my grandfather, Mr. Johnson. Now that you're here to pocket as much of his

money as you can before he dies, you should know that he's never cared for the money."

"He has a lot of what he doesn't care about."

She leaned forward, getting close to Abe, and spoke in a low, bitter voice although, due to her amiable disposition, saying something scathing or mean wasn't exactly her forte. She came across as irritable and frustrated but that's the worst of it.

"That's why he's paying so much for your stupid fight, my friend. He'd rather his money go to a total stranger than to my father."

"And what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Why doesn't he give the money to his princess?"

She started to say something but stopped. "Ah...you know...you're pretty smart. I see what you're up to. I see it now." She sat back in her chair and took a last gulp of orange juice, put the cup down and wiped her mouth with her napkin, which she then placed on top of the half eaten plate. "Tuck admires you a great deal. He told me as much yesterday. And I can see that you're no ordinary boxer. You're trying to get info out of me. You're not sitting here because you just wanted to talk."

He shrugged that off and said, "Nah...it came up. I'm not trying to be sneaky."

"I don't like being played."

He sighed and stood up, reached into his pocket and put a twenty and a crumpled five on the table. "For the privilege of your company," he said to her. Then, to me, he said, "Be careful little bro. There are issues brewing."

"That we agree on," Sam replied.

He stared at her for a moment and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. His expression was thoughtful, searching, yet oddly compassionate too. It made no sense to me. "No offense," he said to her. "I really did enjoy talking with you."

Sam scoffed and replied, "Just a word of advice, my fistic friend: you should take off now. Just leave. You'll never get any money out of this."

This last sentence, she whispered and I couldn't hear it fully but was able to read her lips because she said it so slowly.

"I trust your grandfather. You do too."

"It's not about him. My father won't be pleased when he gets wind of this. And he will figure this out, no matter how sneaky you guys try and be about it. Tuck is probably doing it this way just to make fun of him, but he's gonna get it before too long. And he and my mother will make sure that you don't pocket the money. They'll figure something out. Trust me. He's an attorney. He makes a living by making life incomprehensible for honest people."

"Oh."

"I'm sure you're pretty nifty with your fists, big boy, and I'm sure that young men admire you and dumb women throw themselves at you, but you're in a whole different league here. Just go home."

"They just looked dumb...but they were very nice," Abe said.

"I'm serious."

"You'd lose your boyfriend if I leave. Charlie doesn't have a ride home."

She looked over at me with a funny expression. "I can give him a ride. We both live in Asheville."

"You live in Asheville?" I blurted out.

"Yeah," Abe said nodding and grinning to himself. "Bernard didn't tell you that. He told me last night when I realized where you were. He seems to think it's funny."

"So, it's settled. Save yourself the agony and drama. I'll bring Charlie home."

"I thought you were living in New York," I said excitedly, "or L.A. or Paris. Wow. We just moved down a few years back. Abe wanted to get out of New York."

"I gave him my word," Abe replied.

"Is it even a legit fight? He's doing this in secret so my dad can't stop it. You don't have to honor a contract that you won't profit from anyway. And it's not that my grandfather's lying to you. He'd never do that. It's after the fact. As long as Tuck is alive, he's able to keep my dad off your back but without him you'd be easy prey. I know that's probably hard for you to hear and that it's tough for a guy like you to hear a woman tell you that you can't handle what's coming, but it's the truth. You won't be sued for backing out - especially since he's dying."

"I said I gave my word, not a contract."

"This is fantastic. You're right in Asheville," I kept babbling on, ecstatic over my turn of fortune.

"You just want the money." Her face contorted in a spasm of emotion and for a second I thought she was going to yell at him, but with visible effort, she managed to control herself. In a tense voice, she added, "You just want to bleed him dry and take what he's worked for all these years."

Maybe you were poor and all that but that doesn't exclude you from being greedy too. Why can't everyone leave him alone?"

She got up and walked off, stopping at the door, the other patrons watching our drama curiously, confusedly. Abe had his mighty arms crossed in front of his chest and was standing there shaking his head ever so slightly, almost imperceptibly. I could tell that he was shaking his head but I doubt the other diners were aware of it. Sam stopped at the door and turned back. She looked at me. Her eyes were plaintive, forlorn, and hurting.

"I gotta go," I said to Abe. I was going to add, "Do what you must," but I figured it would be a waste of breath. He always does anyway. At least at that moment, knowing what I knew then, I was more concerned for her than for my brother. You can think of me what you will for that.

CHAPTER 5

I SPENT the rest of the day with Sam. She was moody; one minute full of gloom, quiet and melancholy under the spotless, pure heavens, and the next joyous and talking about her work, her art, and memories of her grandfather. There was, of course, a sense of gravity to it all but, whatever was going on around us, I was focused on her and her alone. It's not that I was unaware of the momentous events taking shape, it's just that, well, I was in the passionate grip of just being in love - plus, I was only 19.

We didn't row back out to the shack. Sam said it would be too hot to hang out and that we should wait for later. It was right at that point when it dawned on me that she'd been playing records last night on an old stereo and there was no power there. She explained that Bernard had rigged a converter because a generator made an obscene amount of noise. Anyway, we stayed in town, browsed, shopped, ate lunch at a seafood place that was pretty good, and walked the small downtown beach with the park in front of it. We were sitting at one of the picnic tables, in the light, feathery shade of a rather fat palm tree, when her

father found us. He'd parked his SUV, which he kept at Bernard's just for such a purpose, down on the main street and walked out to us. Sam saw him coming and said, "Well, I knew we weren't going to avoid him all day."

He didn't look anything like his father I thought, but maybe that had more to do with demeanor than looks in retrospect. They were both on the thin side but her father was just a little taller and a little thicker. His name was Wayne. Sam had told me that Bernard wanted to name him John Wayne Tucker but her grandmother talked him into just Wayne. This was still not a bad compromise because the other option that Bernard had weighed seriously - and I'm not kidding - was naming him after one of his favorite boxers, Sugar Ray Robinson. When I heard of this I thought that Ray Tucker had a certain ring to it and was better than Wayne, which, in my opinion at least, hadn't aged as well as Ray. After all, I still knew people named Ray but couldn't think of a single Wayne. But this wasn't what Bernard had in mind fifty-five years ago. He actually wanted to name him Sugar Ray Tucker. Well. Watching him approach, in a pair of tan shorts and tucked in polo, with brand new, spotless and expensive sandals, I could see that such a moniker as "Sugar Ray" would have been as ill-fitting for Wayne Tucker as "Iron Mike" would have been for me. He looked like one of those over-priced lawyers I've seen hanging around golf clubs, who look all snobby and special and couldn't win a fight with a wet paper bag.

Was that harsh? Well, wait until you get to know him.

Bernard had that close cropped hair like Clint Eastwood in the movie where he played the cantankerous Marine DI. I

don't remember the name of it. But Sam's father had a real nice head of hair, still fighting off the salt except around the temples, and was full and black. He had her eyes - or she had his, if you prefer - but they lacked that gentle quality, her humility and tranquil passion. He came up and gave her a kiss on the cheek and a hug.

"And you're the fighter's brother?" He extended a hand to me.

"Yes, sir. Charlie." We shook hands and his grip was strong.

He went around the other side of the table and sat down. I thought he looked pensive, worried.

"I don't mean to be rude, but could you take a walk? I'd like to talk with Samantha."

I started to get up, but stopped when Sam put a hand on my shoulder.

"You can say whatever you want in front of him, Dad."

Wayne let out a sigh, shook his head and seemed resigned to the situation. It was clear that he'd had little success with changing her mind on vexing issues in the past.

"I'm just hanging out with Charlie. Relaxing. You don't need to make a big deal about it."

"Your grandfather is..."

"He told me."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm hanging in there. I just need my space. I'll be fine. Charlie helps a lot. Music, the water, the shack..."

"The shack..." he shook his head and looked irritated.

"Anyway."

“So, you’re *handling* this by cavorting around with this gold-digger and avoiding your family.”

She crossed her arms on the table and rested her head on them, like a little girl sneaking a nap in grade-school. Turning her head to the side, facing me she said to him, “You’re boring in your predictability.”

He looked like he had a headache coming on. I guess I should have felt a little more uncomfortable than I did but, strangely, whenever I was with her, no matter the circumstances, it was as though I was where I belonged. As long as she welcomed me, I was undaunted, and fairly well sure of myself. It helped that I wasn’t central in the controversies and that what I was accused of, in this case of being a greedy little gold-digger, was utterly and fantastically absurd.

“You can’t see this for what it is,” he said.

“If I may say, sir, I’m not a gold-digger. I hate digging or getting dirty for that matter. It makes quite a mess of my nails.”

“Was that a joke? Are you making a joke out of this?”

I really thought that he was thinking of punching me.

“Actually, you’re right, sir. In all seriousness, your accusation makes no sense because I don’t need to dig for gold in this case. It’s my brother that fights for money. I’m here for the love.”

I gave him a big, sarcastic smile.

Then he punched the crap out of me.

Just kidding. But he really, really looked like he wanted to.

He looked around thoughtfully at the little island town, at the beach, the blue water, and then at his singularly lovely daughter. I hadn't ever been in the presence of such a man before, one of such utter self-control and arrogance at once, so he fascinated me and I watched him like I might watch a movie rather than a real person. No, he didn't seem real to me and I think fairly that this was the reason behind my cavalier attitude. I can be sarcastic and witty when I'm around Abe, or even when I'm in environments like the boxing gym where I know that he's king and I won't pay for my impudence, but only then and absolutely never when I'm intimidated. So, you see, that's the weird thing about meeting Sam's father - I should have been intimidated, should have been careful and worried, if not for my sake then at least for Abe and Sam's. But I didn't quite regard him as real, nor the whole rest of the situation for that matter. I mean, c'mon! How do these things happen to a guy? Who meets a crazy and terminal billionaire that wants to have your brother engage in a one of a kind cross-discipline match with a winner take all purse of one billion dollars? Oh, and let's not forget that this bold and eccentric and soon to be dead guy also has the world's greatest woman as his granddaughter and she's there, all emotional and downcast over her pending loss, and she can't do without my company.

Really, seriously, you have to stop and consider what I was going through for a second in order to realize my state of mind and, therefore, make sense of my impertinence to a rather grumpy grown man that was the father of the woman I adored. None of it seemed real. I knew it was but I

was all giddy and running on adrenaline at that point. I don't drink and have never been drunk but I suppose, going on what I've seen and heard, that I was in a state quite similar to a man that was, well, bombed, three sheets to the wind, tipsy, and all that other stuff that denotes a person not firing on all of his rational cylinders.

So, I watched Wayne Tucker look around and was supremely fascinated by his aristocratic nature. He really was condescending and pretentious. You could tell that he didn't feel comfortable and he thought the whole place was beneath him. Before he had sat down he'd swept his hand carefully over the seat and the table top, a look of disapproval and apprehension on his face, and then he sat awkwardly, as though there ought to be a back to the seat. It was a picnic table, for crying out loud. Who sits like that at a picnic table? Well, I don't think that my humor, nor the bug eyed way I was looking at him, like I was a tourist seeing an exotic foreigner for the first time in my sheltered life, much added to his mood so he stood up and bid us farewell.

"We'll talk later," he said. "You know where I'll be."

"You can row out and visit me anytime you want," Sam replied, taking his hand, an action that caused him to fidget awkwardly for a moment.

"You're one of a kind, honey...and you should be careful what you wish for," he said, patted her hand and started to walk away. Then, he stopped, turned and said to me, "I'm sorry if I offended you."

"No...nope. It's not every day that a lawyer calls you greedy and underhanded," I replied with another smile and

it was a struggle for me not to crack up at my own joke.

"Funny guy," he said while not looking like he found me funny at all.

We didn't see anyone the rest of the day, not Bernard, Abe, her mother or father, or anyone else we knew and that was, as you can imagine, perfectly in tune with my desires. I had Sam all to myself. I asked her questions about her family situation and she in turn asked about mine. I explained to her that Abe and I had different fathers and about my mother's drinking. We were back in the shack again, sitting on the floor with a record playing (Rumours) when she asked me why Abe boxed. "Was he always aggressive?"

"No. No. He was always protective."

"Strange reason to box."

"Not really. We were living in Schenectady and there was this guy there, Troy, a boyfriend of Mom's. Well, whenever he was there life was pretty bad. He had a rotten temper and I always had to be super-duper quiet. If I made too much noise playing I'd get yelled at and he yelled like a man possessed. I was just a kid, you know...playing with my cars and my guys..."

"Guys?"

"My dolls. I had a General Custer. He had a real cool blue uniform and he was my favorite. One time Troy got real mad at me for making fighting noises with him, so he took him and threw him outside."

"Seriously?"

“Well, that’s not the worst of it. A dog gets a hold of him and starts tearing into him. Troy just stood at the door and laughed and told me that that’s what happened in the *real world*, so I better learn to deal with it.”

“Oh my...he fed your favorite toy to a dog. What a...”

“My mother was sleeping. She’d been working all night the night before and then drank a too much wine when she got home while I was eating breakfast. I guess she passed out or something. Isn’t it amazing what you can think of as normal when you’re a kid?”

She shook her head sympathetically.

“Well, he’d smacked me a few times before and I was really trying to be careful. To this very day I still don’t think I was making much noise. I was playing on the couch, kneeling on this ratty carpet we had on the floor and he was sitting in his chair watching a game. The volume was up pretty high on the TV and he’d been sitting there watching the game and drinking beers and telling me or Abe to fetch him a new one every so often. I couldn’t play in the bedroom because Mom had passed out on the bed and the lights were out and she had to work again that night. I suppose I could have played in our bedroom - Abe and I shared a room but it was real, real small and I had no space. I mean, seriously, the whole couch was open.

“So, I’m crying and freaking out as this ugly mutt is gnawing on my guy and he’s literally mocking me. And I’m just five!”

“Unbelievable.”

“Well, all of a sudden, out of the bedroom comes Abe. He’s 16 at that point. He’s already boxing and winning

some tournaments in the amateurs. That was his way of dealing with the situation in the house, I guess. Well, he butts past us, storms out the door, walked down the crooked, rickety steps, goes right up to the dog and just kicks the crap out of it and gets my Custer doll back. It's all chewed up and his left leg is torn off at the knee but he has him. So, that severely ticks off Troy and he storms out after Abe and demands the doll. 'Give em to me,' he's yelling, and Abe refuses. They're arguing and arguing, yelling and screaming - well, Abe's not. He doesn't yell. He just says that he's not giving the doll back and that's that.

"Well, Troy was a pretty big guy. Abe's probably six foot at that point and Troy's a little taller and heavier too, maybe 200 pounds. Abe was 150 around that time, I guess. Can you believe that I remember this stuff? Well, it helped to have a brother that could kick butt; it helped to deal with the other issues we were facing. It made life seem okay and maybe even balanced in a weird, sad way.

"So, Troy is just going ballistic. He's around 30 and he'd just come over and crash now and then at our place. It's not like he was loyal to Mom or anything and Abe hated that. Either way, Abe never lost his cool or yelled back. Troy is screaming at him, demanding the doll and Abe keeps turning, turning, avoiding and keeping it from him. The dog is barking. It was a Rottweiler mixed with a lab maybe and I never knew who it belonged to. But, anyway, it's barking and growling and Troy is yelling. It was crazy. I ran out and Abe tried to hand my newly one-legged Custer to me but Troy got a hold of him and pulled him away. That was it."

"What happened?"

"Abe's got this look, right, it's a nasty, cold stare. It's the first time I saw it. He told Troy to hand Custer back to me. Troy said no. It was crazy how fast it happened. Abe shot forward with a hook/cross combo. Both shots landed. It's good that 16 year-old Abe hit him. If today's Abe hit him bare fisted, he'd be dead. Well, no matter, he dropped like he was dead anyway...just crumpled in a pathetic heap and was completely, eerily still. That was the first time I ever saw a man knocked out."

I looked her square in the eye when I told her the next thing.

"Custer never hit the ground, Sam."

"What?"

"His little blue uniform, scratched and torn by the dog, his wavy blond hair...never hit the dirty sidewalk in front of our place. Abe caught it. Troy collapsed from the combo and Abe made sure to catch my guy before he hit the ground."

"Wow."

"Yeah, yeah...well, a few hours later Troy shows back up with his posse. He's got five guys with him that all run drugs or something like that. That's what he did for a living basically."

"These guys are gang members?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I guess so - they were all losers without real jobs. Well, they all come back a few hours later. Mom's up by then and she goes and tries to stop the whole thing. I remember her pleading with Troy and crying and all that. I can still hear her crying, 'that's my baby...not my baby...don't hurt my boys, Troy...don't hurt my boys.' There's so

much tension and noise and her crying that I was beyond scared."

"I can only imagine."

"Troy's saying that the whole thing is because of my stupid doll and that he wants that doll."

She shook her head dismally.

"Isn't that crazy? Well, Mom is trying to get the whole situation to go away so that no one gets hurt. Troy's guys are all glaring at Abe. Mom tells me to hand over Custer and Abe tells her no. The whole thing was nasty. She's pleading with me and crying and Abe just keeps calmly saying that no one is taking Custer from me. I'm frozen and I don't know what to do but, ultimately, I listen to Abe. After a while of this Custer standoff, Troy gets fed up and makes a mad grab at him and nearly gets him from my arms. But Abe intercepted him again. Another right hand sends him flying into the end table by the couch."

"Oh, my..."

I could barely bring myself to describe the rest of the scene to her as its violence was still disturbing. Abe began to fend off the attacks from Troy's cohorts and, somewhere in the process, he ended up grabbing Custer from me for safekeeping - and to keep me out of the fray. I'd gone to hide in the corner. There was so much noise and I was terrified. My mother was screaming. Abe was, even then, an incredible fighter but there were too many of them and they were grown men while he was still just a teenager. Plus, the room was small and cluttered so he had nowhere to move and he was trying to fight with only one hand. Finally, he ended up against the wall between the

bedrooms, clutching and covering my Custer, on the floor, getting kicked and punched savagely. They yelled all sorts of obscenities I'd never heard before as they pounded on him. Troy was back up and he was vicious. He landed several horrible blows to Abe's head even though Abe did his best to keep moving, rolling side to side, and stay covered.

"Abe never gave Custer up," I finished. "Someone outside shouted that police were on the street and so they stopped. They weren't able to break him. I'm telling ya, Sam, he hung in there with a determination, grim and sure as death, and never let go. He was holding and protecting my stupid doll! But you'd have thought it was a baby...or me or my mother. He wouldn't let go, wouldn't give up. I watched them wailing on him, kicking and stomping and punching, and he was bleeding but there wasn't any quit in him. Once someone saw the cops on the street they stopped and left. He was dazed, bloodied, battered, but not defeated - he was smiling when it was over. Can you believe that? He smiled - sneered really - at Troy as they left and he sat up, still holding Custer.

"Ever since then I've wondered about that scene and thought about it. You and your dad can call Abe what you will and that's your right but I'm telling you that he isn't what you think. He's not common at all. Someone might be stubborn but that wasn't obstinacy, Sam. No one goes through that and hangs in there for the sake of being stubborn. It was something else...something higher..."

"Tell me."

"Afterwards, when they'd left, and the noise and hate and ugliness walked out with them, he stood up, unsteadily and yet proud, beaten, bloody and damaged but as tall as I ever saw a man. Mom was sobbing and holding me. I stopped crying because there was something in the way he looked at me that was unexpected. He wasn't a boy; he wasn't a man, or a boxer. He was altogether higher than that. Those men didn't beat him. Instead, they gave him something - they gave him honor. He didn't fight to save my doll. He fought for something more.

"He hands me Custer and says, 'Here...don't let him go...don't ever let him go...and we're safe, you and I. You'll always be safe.' Then, he glared at my mother, with both fire and spite in those usually reticent eyes. It was like he knew something suddenly that'd been a mystery before and he looked at her with this sudden realization and then his look softened and the fury waned. He shook his head at her. Such pity. Such pity. She saw it and it broke her. She started crying worse than before and it was the most heart breaking thing I ever saw and still have ever seen. I didn't understand it.

"But, you see, he fought for and tried to save the innocence of our childhood. That's what it was all about. Mom's drinking brought those men into our lives. She loved us but her sins left us vulnerable in a way kids should never be vulnerable. That's what Abe figured out right then and that's what he fought for. I never saw him lose a fight thereafter because he was fighting for what that ugly, indulgent, alcoholic way of life stole from us. So, you see him as hard. I see him as soft. It's just that he won't let his

guard down. He won't drink, won't smoke, and won't let vice touch him because he saw it destroy us. You had a different world to grow up in and I love it too...your art and beauty and photography, but for me, it was Abe's fists and Abe's will that let me write. There are men and things in the world that will destroy by using others, by indulging their appetites without care of the consequences, and by consuming everything they touch. And that's our way of life now, in this country, I think. The world we were born into worships the right now and the expedient. We're told to pursue happiness without character and it all turns to self-indulgence. There's no sense of honor. There's no duty, or responsibility. That's the way it is. We don't have art, Sam, if those men and their reckless passions are running free. We have anarchy...we have rage and despair. At least for me, Abe blocked them."

She was crying sweet tears of a soul convicted and changed. And she scooted over on the rough wooden floor, hugged and held me and we both cried together and I felt weirdly that she was family too. I'd never told anyone of this, had never trusted anyone with our story until her, so I was sure that I loved her except, at least right then, I wasn't sure how I loved her. Love was strange in the way it ebbed, like it was the sea and I was standing in it, all wet and at its mercy, and it was pulling at me at the same time that it was soothing me. It was joy, pleasure, and danger at once. Love has never been what I thought it would be. It has always made demands that I didn't expect.

I finished the story with her lying in my lap. I was sitting against the wall, stroking her thick, dark hair, and I

watched the needle as it glided gently over the LP, riding it, surfing on it. I told her how later that same night, after Mom had gone to work and Abe had gone down the street to the park to shoot baskets, Troy came back to the little house.

“Where is he?”

“He’s shootin baskets with his friends.”

“No. Not him.”

He meant Custer. I didn’t answer, couldn’t answer. I sat there in fear and silence. Even then, as young as I was, I could see it for what it was. Troy didn’t hate me, he hated himself and he hated the fact that he was such an ugly, angry, hateful man. I was too young to figure that out right then but I could sense it in his expression. He walked into the bedroom and walked backed out with him. He wasn’t hard to find because I’d left him laying right in the middle of my bed. Troy looked at me again and sneered. He’d won, but I wonder what price he had paid in his life to be so awful. He had girlfriends in town other than my mother as I understand it and basically he used them all. My mom had been so pretty, even as the alcohol began to wear her down. She had fair skin and dark hair with pretty green eyes. I still remember them and they were forever full of warmth and intelligence but, also, sadness too because she had lost so much and caused so much pain. She had fallen in love with the wrong men - men that were attracted to her body and didn’t care what was happening to her soul. Troy was the latest of these so-called men and yet he was smart enough to sense it in his own heart. That late afternoon, with him standing near the door, a setting sun casting

shadows through the old decrepit town we lived in, I could feel the cool air coming in from the screen door, and I could see a weird look on his face. He scowled at me, yes, but it was a scowl born up from deep within his own heart where there was all manner of guilt and decay. I'm convinced that every man has born within him that image of his Creator and he knows that he isn't supposed to hurt the weak or even treat them with indifference, which in our case, was just as hurtful as being socked.

I can't really recall exactly what he said as he stood in the doorway, blocking the light from outside, casting a shroud over me. I just watched him and saw for myself the pettiness that the lack of self-control will lead a man to. Of course, I didn't understand that then but I was taking mental snapshots so that I could remember and ponder the lessons of the moment as I grew up, and that's exactly what I've done. Troy walked out with my doll. He was just another man stealing from the children he should have nurtured because he was still a child himself. He walked out with the prize of my childhood. I didn't have much, only a few toys and four channels on an old TV with rabbit ears.

Abe came home a little while later. I don't know how long it had been but it was dark by then. He was covered in sweat from playing and was breathing pretty hard, which wasn't something you saw often because he was always, always in such pristine condition. I suppose he must have played harder than usual, perhaps with a great anger over what had happened. Well, he came home and grabbed a drink from the nearly empty fridge and then made some spaghetti and sauce for us both to eat and we sat down at

the lopsided yellow table we had in the kitchen between the fridge and old stove. We were eating and he was looking at me weird. I noticed the marks on his face from the fight and every now and then he winced if he turned the wrong way. What a tough guy! To take a beating like that and then to go out and play ball afterwards, like nothing had happened, required quite a bit of will. I sincerely believe that it's impossible for Abe to feel self-pity like the rest of us. Anyway, I always figured he did that to send a message that he wasn't beaten. If he had stayed in bed or gone to the hospital then they would have thought they won.

"Where's Custer?" He asked me.

"He's in my room."

He looked at me softly, softer than I'd ever seen him look at me and said, "No, he's not...I was just in there. You either leave him on your bed or he's with you out here."

I started to cry.

He came over to me, knelt down and put a hand on my head. I remember being all hot and sweaty even though it was chilly outside after the sun had gone down.

"It's okay," he kept saying. "It's all okay. Did Troy come back?"

I nodded and kept crying, too ashamed to glance up at him.

"Did he hurt you?"

"He just took him. I didn't fight, Abe. I didn't fight like you did. I'm so sorry. I was scared. I should have fought like you did."

Abe held me and hugged me and rocked me for a long time there in the tiny kitchen, our spaghetti forgotten and

getting cold. "Why didn't you run and tell me, Charlie. Why didn't you come get me? Did you think I'd be mad at you for not fighting?"

"No. No. I just didn't want you to get hurt anymore. I love you..."

This was the only time in my whole life that I saw my brother cry and, man, did he cry. He kept hugging me and sobbing and smoothing my hair and saying it was okay.

I kept crying into his chest and saying how much I didn't want him to ever get hurt again. It was true; I'd rather be without my Custer than to have him get hurt. That was the only thing my young mind could assimilate; all of the problems were because I had tried to hang onto Custer and had made noise with him. "I'll be better, Abe. Please don't be mad at me. I'll be better. I won't make noise anymore when Troy is here. I'm sorry."

When I said this, his face fell forward into my lap and suddenly, oddly, I was the one consoling him. He wept with a terrible, dreadful force that I feared would utterly engulf him. He cried for a long time and with an intensity I knew nothing of and yet, in all of youth's simplicity, and with the intrinsic wisdom that comes from love and family, I understood completely that he and I were closer than ever before and there was nothing to break that bond. They say that great friends are like brothers. Well, we became greater than brothers on that night.

He took my hands into his and looked into my eyes. "You didn't do anything wrong, Charlie. You did the right thing. Stay like this. Stay this innocent and pure and full of love.

There's no need to apologize. You didn't let anyone down. You did fine."

That was a deep and essential moment for me, I told Sam, because it marked the course for me to follow. I truly believe that all of us hit a moment - a moral moment - where our leaders, parents, teachers, or coaches - let us know that what's best within us, what is highest and good, is to be embraced or, tragically, we're told that those things aren't real or we are, even worse, punished for them. That moral flame wasn't snuffed out that night as it could have been. Abe put more wood on the fire with those words and that love. He let me know that it was okay to expect love and honor on earth and to seek it, so that great fire has always been burning in my heart.

He left after he cleaned up from dinner and said he'd bring something back for me. I watched TV some more. Can you imagine that today? I was five and people kept leaving me by myself. Not that I did anything except play or watch TV, but today that would get everyone in serious trouble. Probably then too but the neighborhood was so poor that no one really cared.

Well, he came back a while later with a bag in his hand. I was sitting in the middle of the couch, my little legs crossed Indian style as we used to call it and he opened up the bag and pulled a handful of Matchbox cars out. I'd seen them before, down at the market on the corner where mom got groceries now and then, and I certainly wanted them. He bought three: red, green, and black. I don't remember their style, just their color. As enraptured as I was when I saw them come from the bag I felt embarrassed too. I had never

asked for them at the store because I figured we didn't have the money and now here I was receiving them on this of all nights. So, I hesitated and pulled back. Abe took them out of their wrappers and put them down beside me. "They're yours," he said as he knelt down. "Go ahead and play. Have your races. Go vroom, vroom as loud as you want. Be five, Charlie."

My mother usually got home pretty early in the morning and that next day I slept late because I had stayed up the night before and played with those cars. When I awoke I could hear voices from the other room and when I came out Abe was talking with my mother. I came out and sat on the couch and watched them in the kitchen. I really couldn't hear what they were saying because they were speaking low, in terse, forceful whispers, and because I didn't have a hearing aid yet. They cost something like a thousand dollars and, well, for us, that might as well have been a billion, so I missed quite a few things and a lot of people just figured that I was stupid because, evidently, that's what a partially deaf kid looks like when he can't hear what's going on.

After a little while I could tell they were arguing. Mom was becoming quite upset and finally, in evident frustration and self-reproach, she yelled at him, "What the hell do you want me to do, Abe? What?" It was terrible to see. She was at an end, full of a pain I could never imagine, full of hopelessness and an all-encompassing despair. She looked so broken and defeated.

Then Abe said, "Be a mother for God's sake." He had her hands in his, just like he had mine the night before and was kneeling on the linoleum, his bruised and battered face full

of worry and fire at once. He was pleading with her and yet there was condemnation in his pleas. "Stop drinking. Stop being weak because when you're like that you bring your sins home to us...and to him." He looked in my direction but didn't really see me. "And stop letting men like them have you, because when they have you, they have us too. When you sell yourself to them for a bottle, you give us up cheaper than the buzz. Be strong. I know you love us so let your love make you strong. Turn back, Mom. Rise up. Be the woman you wanted to be when you first held him as a baby. I remember that look. Be that woman. Be a slave to your love and be strong for us. Don't be a slave to the bottles anymore...they make you Troy's whore."

She slapped him. His already abused face suffered another strike. It was the last time anyone ever struck him that didn't end up paying dearly. It was the last time he ever let himself be vulnerable.

So, he knelt there before her and she struck him and wailed and cried and finally she gave up and went to bed. At some point, I'm not sure when because we've never really talked much about the specifics of the event, she got up and went out. It's probable that she couldn't sleep considering what she had just heard from her son. How does a heart rest with those words crushing it, suffocating it?

In the blur that followed I learned that her car had hit a tree at a very high speed. She had alcohol in her blood but I've long thought that it wasn't because she was drunk that she died. I think she hated herself, started on a bottle of vodka and then, after a few contemptuous gulps, the self-loathing overcame her, and Abe's words rang too loudly in

her ears and she snapped. I think she drove into the tree on purpose. Who does 70 on one of those cramped city streets, narrow and lined with parked cars on each side? Who does that? That's rage. That's...well, I've never said it like this before but it's true - that's suicide.

CHAPTER 6

SAM and I spent another night alone in the shack. We listened to music the whole time, most of it from days my mother knew and I found myself wishing I knew what she had thought of those old songs. It was a unique and personal way to connect again to a woman I only scarcely knew and I regretted not having been able to know this about her. A man ought to know what was dear to the heart of the woman that bore him. Of course, I never wondered about my father because he was never spoken of - a passing flame of hers, ignited by loneliness, despair and wine or vodka, I'm sure. But, though Abe had always been more than consolation for me up until that point, for some reason that night, watching her dance and twirl slowly in the light of a white Florida moon, I began to envy her for having had a father at all, even one she despised. At least she had that luxury.

We were awake long into the humid night, talking and taking in, meditating on and reverently in awe of the sweet, forgotten songs of simpler years, of an America that was changing and growing cruder, uglier, and barbaric. I

watched Sam, her dark eyes still somehow able to shine and radiate warmth even in dim candlelight. As she told me about Wayne and Pam, her mother, and I listened to her go on about *her island*, and what it all meant and how her parents were embarrassed by Bernard's lack of refinement. I couldn't help but see how she was a woman exiled in this age; she was a refugee in our culture of lust and greed. As I heard Stevie singing about a white winged dove I watched her with a profound fascination because she seemed so much of what our culture couldn't produce anymore.

When I was finally back in the house it was only to take a shower, change my clothes, and get something free to eat. Though the shack was uniquely romantic, an ideal little enclave of seclusion, a haven of music and an escape from the world's incessant badgering of the soul, it was, well, quite simply, inconvenient. It sat there in the water on its rickety and spindly legs, braving the intensity of many monstrous storms as well as withstanding the steady, limitless, encroachments of the tide. And that tide was like life itself, with its disappointments and pains, always pulling and pushing, never stopping. It was an asylum, yet one that was slipping slowly, inexorably under the tide that never rested. It was innocence against the ocean of life that would take it down, remove it from this world, send it to the floor of the sea of cruel reality and it was the good and the true and the beautiful standing meagerly in the path of a world that would not have such things. What's good and beautiful are always pushed against, always so vulnerable, always in danger of going under and being washed away. So, after

refreshing in the house, I sat on the gazebo and watched the shack, thought of this and grew terribly depressed.

Sam was off with Bernard for the morning and I was left to these melancholy thoughts. It seemed unfair to me that Bernard was dying, the shack was going under, and I never had the chance to listen to music with my mother. So much weariness and futility, I thought...that was our lot...that was my lot.

So, frankly, I was actually delighted when Wayne came up and interrupted me, for I truly think such moments can grow too long and thus dangerous for the sensitive soul. Abe always warned me that I needed to grow up a little and stop all my belly-button gazing. Well, Wayne looked the same as the day before. He wore another golf-type outfit, multi-colored shorts with a belt and a white polo. He was always spiffy.

"Good morning, Charlie," he said as he took a seat across from me so that he ended up facing his yacht. I was looking off to the shack. "Glad to see you're back. That's not a very safe place to be. It really ought to be knocked down before it falls down and takes Sam with it. If it wasn't for my father someone would have already knocked it down by now. Or, at least, the coast guard would have come by and declared it off limits."

I nodded slowly and didn't say anything. He waited and gave me a chance but I wasn't interested in trying to change his mind.

"But, listen, that's not what I want to talk with you about...it's not why I came out here. I wanted to let you

know that I don't hate you. I'm not a bad guy. I'm just trying to help you see the truth."

"Ah...the truth as you see it."

"Yeah, well, listen, I talked with your brother yesterday. He's quite set in his ways. He doesn't see this for what it is."

"He's here because he trusts your father."

"And that's great, son. It truly is. I admire him for it. Lord knows, we could use more men like that in this world."

"Amen."

"Good. So we agree. I knew you'd agree to help me."

"Help you? I just agreed that we need more men like my brother."

He leaned forward and lowered his tone, seeming more serious, more intimate and sincere. He said, "I know that my dad is planning a fight. He's talked about stuff like that for years. Do you think I'm stupid, Charlie?"

I laughed.

"I'm serious. Do you think I'm stupid? You must if you think I don't know there's a fight brewing here. Men like your brother and Joel Arthur don't just show up at a place like this - dumpy, old, going nowhere - to hang out. You think I don't see that? I see that and I know what's up. I'm not stupid. They're planning to fight."

"What difference does it make anyway? And I don't know if you've been paying attention, but I'm not exactly in the thick of things with that stuff. I've got other concerns."

"Yeah. Like trying to get in my daughter's pants," he said with a heavy sigh.

"Wonderful."

"Well, that's all fine, Charlie. You can do what you want. She's a big girl. But, you've got your hands full too, you know."

"I know I'm out of my league, if that's what you're saying. And, really, I don't care."

He sat there for a while, looking off into the water with a blank expression. I admit to never paying attention to law and politics in the past and, given the course of events that followed, I must admit my embarrassment for this negligence. Had I, and countless others for that matter, been less self-absorbed, paid a bit more attention, perhaps we wouldn't have endured the terrible tribulations that were then ready to beset us. I can't believe

I never noticed any of it. It was truly the calm before the tempest. Well, that being what it is, I mean to say that Wayne Tucker's demeanor and vibe were utterly alien to me. He was polished, his mannerisms exact and practiced, everything appeared both natural and unnatural at once which endlessly perplexed me. I know I'm a bit of a geek, but being like Wayne just struck me as taking up way too much thought and energy.

The only common experience I'd had with someone like him was when Abe went to buy a car and I sat watching the salesman. Wayne reminded me a little of him in that they were both apparently sincere from all appearances - I mean there was nothing I could put my finger on about them that I found objectionable except for the nagging suspicion that they weren't authentic. I guess that being socially inept, not just awkward, and having the dreadful social affliction of saying exactly what was on my mind, I found such people as

these to be stupendously fascinating. It took effort and experience for me to realize and understand that not everyone else said exactly what they were thinking and many had ulterior motives behind their words and deeds - and this only because of Abe's incessant and bemused prodding. It just didn't occur to me that others weren't like me in regard to relationships.

I look back and can't believe Abe could put up with me.

It was in this spirit that I studied the younger Mr. Tucker. It seems, in retrospect and in the full light of everything that's passed, that when he was truly thinking, that is to say, plotting, he concealed this fact with a basically blank but pleasant countenance. It struck me as funny in a way because he was sitting there looking off to the silent sea and its few companion white clouds and certainly didn't look like a man sitting by the sea looking at the clouds. No, he looked like a man sitting in an office in some city. This was Sam's domain - her home - and Wayne was as out of place as she would be while looking away at the distant heavens from an office on Wall Street.

He didn't appear to notice me chuckling at him.

"I understand that this is all very strange and new for you, Charlie," he said at last. "And I'm sure it's, well...confusing. But my father isn't well."

"I know. He's got cancer or something."

"Charlie...Charlie...and he told you he's dying, right?"

I nodded and wondered.

"Charlie, this isn't the first time he's been dying."

I must have stared at him in stupefaction, like an imbecile. He looked at me sympathetically, like a wise father

looks at a son gone astray due to inexperience.

"And he promised your brother quite a bit of money to do a fight...no promoters, no agents, no casinos...just a real, honest-to-goodness fight. Right? Right? But he's got you keeping secrets and he's doing it down here away from everyone because he just wants to do it his own way, away from the world, right? Am I right?"

I neither agreed nor disagreed. I sat there in the mounting heat and thought and thought. I must have looked terribly confused and I certainly was. I wasn't expecting that.

"He's done this before, Charlie. I'm telling you, he's done this before. Why do you think you're down here in the middle of nowhere? If he were really going to bring the world's two greatest fighters together, there's a million ways to do it better and more sensibly than this. Now, I'm not saying he's a liar, though. No, he's no liar. He's just sick. He's old. And lonely. He's just old, Charlie."

I wanted to argue and defend him, which was surprising because I hadn't thought that I really liked Bernard up until that point. But Sam really did and her love and devotion to him had moved me to better appreciate him, I suppose. Nevertheless, I sat there, bewildered, flummoxed, irritated and, for whatever reason, a bit scared too.

"Sam thinks he's dying. Wouldn't she know?" I protested.

Wayne nodded as if that were a good point but said, "Yeah, but up til now we've protected her from his...from his, aging. She didn't need to go through that...watch him fade, become less and less. Maybe we were wrong, her mother and I. She sure as hell ain't happy with us, that's for

sure. But we didn't want her to go through it all." He paused and looked away at the water again. I saw pain in his eyes; regret too. I think.

"But he became delusional." He winced. "I hate to use that word but there's no other word for it. Let me guess: he promised an obscene amount of money, didn't he?"

Again, I sat in silence, trying my best not to cave.

"But," he leaned forward and whispered, "my father doesn't have that kind of money, Charlie. He's been blowing money for years and we've been doing what we can but he's lost touch with reality in many ways. Don't take my word for it...just look around you. Look at the house. Is this the kind of place that an obscenely rich man lives? Just look! He's brought you guys all the way down here. Did you pay your own way? You did! So you do the math then. He's convincing, though. Always has been. He appeals to character and honor and, you know, that's all great. He really does believe in those things. It's just that he's not living in today...not in the real world. He wants to be that kind of man but he's made some mistakes, lost some money and that hurt him. He's not gotten over his disappointments, Charlie and can't admit that he isn't *the man* anymore.

"I'm really sorry he dragged Sam into this. She got here early, you know. She's such a romantic and just loves, loves, loves her grandfather and can't fathom that he's not firing on all cylinders anymore. In a way, she still wants to be a little girl spending her summers here. I should've been there more for her. I was working. There was always an

important case and an important client. It was always something.”

I stayed silent and listened to him for a little while. He went on about his regrets and how sorry he was that Sam was going to get hurt and that he was actually happy I was there for her. I’m naive, but that seemed to be bogus. Nevertheless, he prattled on and I listened and grew even more depressed because he had a way of spinning things that made sense. I didn’t say anything, though. I stayed strong. I kept telling myself that Abe was too smart, too savvy, too...well, Abe-like, to get drawn into the delusions of an old eccentric. That was my lifeline. When I’d had enough, I excused myself by saying that I had to go to the bathroom. I never did say anything about what I knew.

I found Abe a little later finishing a workout in one of the two buildings between the main house and the really big airplane hangar-looking building at the very back of the property. From the outside it looked like a smallish house and had windows with black shutters on either side of the front door. But inside it was certainly not someone's living quarters. It was a gym.

Abe explained that Bernard had outfitted the formerly empty house as a gym a few years back for his own personal workouts. Being a boxing aficionado in the first place, he hung bags from the rafters rather than add a bunch of cardio equipment. There were three Everlast bags - two regular size, another was ultra thin, though surprisingly hard. It was a bag designed for sharpshooting

boxers, designed to work on speed due to its slender profile. There was also a top and bottom bag and a big round bag too, which was a soft packed circular target used for body shots, hooks, and uppercuts. To me, the whole place looked like an upscale barn on the inside that had been converted to a boxing gym (without a ring, though) whereas the outside appeared no different than an average suburban home. By this point I was expecting things to surprise me, so I took the irregularities of the place in stride.

From the outside, the house looked like two stories but it wasn't. It just had a very high ceiling that was crisscrossed with beams for all the bags, which were all to the left side of the door when I went in. To my right there was a speed bag, a chin and dip station and jump ropes hanging from red pegs on the wall. Past that there was a small seating area with a sofa and chair that didn't match - the one black and the other red. A small table between them had a few newspapers, an old Ring magazine with Sugar Ray Leonard on it (before the third Duran fight) and a half finished bottle of water. Around the corner was the bathroom, a refrigerator, sink and small cabinet.

Abe was shadow boxing to cool down in front of the mirrors that ringed the wall past the refrigerator. Sweat made his muscled physique shine in the light coming from the bulbs overhead. He glided on those gifted feet, sliding left and then circling right after whipping a pair of jabs, fast as bullets, into the unprotected air. He was a motion machine, slipping, pump-faking, stepping back, back, stopping to jab and hook, then sliding right in a tight circle,

then out to the left, then a whistling one-two, another fake and another obscenely fast combo. He was grace in motion. Power and speed and intelligence all in one, and his eyes were as much a part of this package as his fists and feet. When he was boxing he wore a look of supreme focus and, of course, reminded me completely of the great cats in the wild; those eyes of the hunter commanding the scene, missing nothing, and smartly watching for the opening.

To watch such a man box is not to see violence but poetry and, I must admit, this is especially high praise for poetry. The issue is the command and the speed right when it's needed. Other athletes play games; boxers fight. Both, indeed, are athletes, but the fighter is more than the athlete simply because his own destruction is the goal of the enemy and that is not the case for the soccer player, the baseball player or the champions of the gridiron. True, true, there are far more examples of greatness in football and soccer. Yes, I agree but that's simply because those sports are sports and boxing is really the war that football is said most to resemble. But this isn't the case, can never be the case, and is frightfully silly to suggest in the first place. How did David face Goliath? Did David come forth dribbling a black and white ball? Did the Philistines place a goal-keeper behind their massive champion? Seriously, before there were tanks and air forces, and before then, muskets, and calvary, men met in close combat. And there was my brother, stripped to his waist, a veritable sheet of muscle and precision, and he was ready for such a war that men fought in ages before technology allowed us to slaughter

from afar. I always thought of this when I saw him train or fight. He knew this too and kept it close to heart.

Poetry is prose that captures conflict and tension and plays contradictions over against each other. Here was Abe, prepared for real conflict, prepared for the true tension of warfare and the fate that awaited losers of battles. His speed and fluidity, coupled with the power of his motions, and his unearthly timing and judgment of distance, were the greatest of art because no other artist works against a canvas, a sheet of paper, or a lens that attacks him. To bring order to violent chaos is no small affair. The man that remains calm in the face of mortal fury, sees savage attacks launched that would steal one's head and whisk it away into the air, and yet is poised, professional and steady is the most uncommon of men.

Did Hemingway ever pulverize Faulkner or Twain or Fitzgerald? Did *Old Man and the Sea* ever batter *The Great Gatsby*? Did *War and Peace* and *Crime and Punishment* contend with blows, batter each other, throw vicious, pinpoint counters and endure the rallies of their foe? This is precisely why the boxer has always had men with pens following him. It's why they flocked to Dempsey and Ali. A pen with no conflict to write of is a futile instrument and those men gave the writer a living story. Every writer burns to produce a great drama and the fighter is exactly that, so there's envy of both the physical prowess they lack and the powerful tale their fists tell. A boxer doesn't have to search for perfect endings. This is why, I think, that writers have always loved fighters.

They haven't always loved every boxer as they should, though. The newsmen of Dempsey's day, great men of words from an era when newspapermen wrote - I mean really wrote! - despised his conqueror, Tunney. It was said that Tunney was hated because he fancied himself one of them - an intellectual - but I've always thought that this was missing the obvious. They hated Tunney because he robbed them of their story and their drama by making boxing look too easy. His boxing skills were superlative. He had that rapier jab, paving a path for an underrated right (just ask Dempsey) and was always in motion, motion, motion. He fought so well and so smart that he robbed the fight of its drama and made it look, well, tame. Yes, this is why I think they hated him and it's also why I've long suspected that the press never much fancied Abe either. When it looks too easy and the fighter's defense is so good that other professionals can basically do nothing with him, can't land singular solid blows much less combinations, the spectators hate you for that. It's the mystery of boxing: how civilized men and women expect bloodshed before them - for entertainment or whatever else it is within them that craves a champion's blood.

Abe was indeed poetry in violent, beautiful motion, always beyond his foe's reach and yet always an imminent danger. Nevertheless, he was disliked by the boxing media. They certainly wouldn't like him personally because he came from the slums. American politicians talk a lot about the poor and jockeyed for position to show the electorate that they were helping those downtrodden souls, but they personally weren't fond of people like me and Abe. I've

crossed paths with them at some of the fights. Abe had said it before, "They use us as campaign posters, Charlie, but they have no other use for us other than securing the vote of those that don't know any better." We would see the rich and connected and, truly, they would gawk at and treat Abe as though he was an exotic animal and they'd paid admission. It was cool for them. They'd met and been cordial with a gladiator.

A few years ago, a senator, a man that had been a lawyer like Wayne Tucker, from which state I don't recall, actually asked Abe if he'd ever fought Ali or Tyson. Abe was quite gracious and simply said that he hadn't. I found myself thinking that this senator was supposed to be one of the smartest people in the world and yet he didn't know that Ali and Tyson, especially Ali, were long retired from boxing by the time Abe came on. Worse still was that Abe was a light heavyweight and wouldn't have fought heavyweights anyway. This was the same senator, I should add, that voiced his displeasure after the fight he attended that it had gone the distance. He found it particularly uninspiring, he related to the press afterwards. When I heard that I threw my coffee cup across the room. Abe had pitched a veritable shutout against a previously undefeated fighter, didn't lose a single minute of a single round, and knocked his opponent down twice - in the third and ninth rounds. To the politician, though, it was simply appalling that he never finished his guy by knockout. I should have loved to ask the senator why our budget was never balanced and the country had a debt of gazillions of dollars.

Abe, as usual, never said a word when he heard the senator's lament. He was aware that the so-called civilized men wanted their entertainment to be barbaric although they'd never admit to it. I joked that he should have cut off his ear in the ring after the fight - maybe eaten it too. Perhaps then they would love him. He laughed at that one.

Well, a bell in the corner of the room went off at the end of the round and Abe paused, wiped at sweat streaming down his face (I neglected to mention that there was no air conditioning in the building, though there were two rather large metal fans overhead, which worked remarkably well, I admit, but did nothing for the humidity) and then nodded at me.

"He is risen," he joked.

I smiled and must have looked comically uncomfortable because he looked at me strangely and then really laughed.

"You're having a good time, I see," he added as he walked over and grabbed a black and gray towel from the counter near the refrigerator.

"Well, I was. Just talked to Sam's father."

"Ah."

"He's just about convinced me that Bernard Tucker's crazy and this whole thing is a sham."

"You tell him anything?"

"No."

He watched me and then chuckled to himself. "You probably didn't need to. Betcha he knows all he needs to now."

Irritated, I said, "He seems to make sense."

Abe shrugged and leaned against the counter. "Charlie, we're gonna fight soon. Joel Arthur is here already. The fight's on."

"He's here?"

"Yep. Right across the field...in the house across from here. He brought his wife. She's pregnant."

"Pregnant? How much?"

He held his hand out a little in front of his stomach to indicate she was barely showing at this point.

"Wow. Jeez," I said and shook my head. "You might kill a guy who's about to have a baby and the guy that's hosting the whole weird affair might be senile and broke."

"Is that what you heard?"

"Yep. Yep. And I've got a bad feeling about this whole thing, big brother."

"Wayne Tucker told you that his father was broke?"

"Yep."

"Classic."

I sighed, frustrated and tired and wondering where Sam was. "You really think that you're gonna get all that money? A billion bucks? Seriously?"

His expression didn't change. No emotion or thought registered on his face. "Don't worry, little brother. Even if I got nothing, wouldn't you still be happy that you met Sam? I would be if I were you."

I walked over and smacked one of the black heavy bags with a not so punishing one-two. It was solid and new and didn't give much when I hit it. If it were possible, the bag may have replied to my assault with a "Is that all you got?" rejoinder. But, then again, that's the beauty of the heavy

bag: it doesn't make fun of you and keeps taking whatever you can dish out.

"Yeah," I replied somewhat weakly. "She's the purest thing in the world, Abe. You're honest. You're a man... tough...a fighter...a man of honor. I understand that... because I've seen it. But I've never seen this before. She's something else. I know I sound stupid and I'm grasping at something I'll never have...she's just so heartbroken right now and I'm here. You know? Am I making any sense?" I was walking in circles as I talked now, jabbing at the bags. "You're not like me. I know. But we've been listening to records. She's got an old record player, it's all beaten up just like the shack and there's absolutely nothing new in the whole place and yet it's still beautiful. I've never seen anything like it before." I said that and then doubted what Wayne had said of Bernard. How many girls out there have that much money in their family and live like she does?

"There's nothing wrong with being in love, little brother," he said. "And certainly not with her.."

"Even if it's hopeless?"

"Especially then."

That surprised me. I didn't expect him to say that.

"Well, listen," he walked over and put a sweaty hand on my shoulder, "enjoy this whole thing while you can. I'm not saying that everything's gonna work out fine but no one can about anything at all. You understand? I'm gonna fight Joel Arthur. I might lose. I might win. Either way, I'm prepared... given the circumstances, I'm prepared."

"And the rest of it?"

"What of it?"

“What if it all blows up in our face?”

He shrugged. “A man isn’t a man because he succeeds, Charlie. That’s beyond control. He’s a man when’s he’s committed to great things. Win, lose, or draw.”

“But...”

“Do you think less of Sam because she doesn’t love you the way you love her?”

“I don’t think...” I stopped. I didn’t want to answer the question.

“There’s no guarantees, Charlie. A man has to understand that or else he’s useless and his love isn’t really love - it’s just need and that’s no good for a woman. It’s no good for anyone.”

“Okay.” I lowered my head and looked at the floor that was covered by a thin, black mat that stretched across the entire training area.

“I’ll be fine. I’ve risked these types of things before.”

“That’s true.”

“You haven’t.”

I smiled because there was no way to disagree with that.

“I’m sorry to say that. I certainly don’t mean to scare you off. In fact, I hope I don’t. A man isn’t a man because he knows what he wants. He’s a man when he’s ready to pay the price for what he wants - even if it means failure. Guarantees kill you. A guarantee makes you soft. When men or people or even whole nations seek guarantees they end up seeking comfort. But comfort and ease ruin you.”

“So, that’s what this is? It’s just risk?”

“No, Charlie. It’s the challenge of taking a chance for what you love. An idiot driving a car too fast on a curvy road

is a risk-taker - a thrill-seeker. That's not what I'm talking about. What I'm saying is that when you know what you want and what you want is good and it requires discipline to get it then and only then are you living. It's the wanting and the work, the desire and the discipline that makes men out of us. The want of security for its own sake will cause a man to demand others to give him that security. That's the way that business and art and athletics and all of life give way to politics. Bernard is offering that to me, Charlie. Do you see it? He's coming to us from the not so distant past, but a past we've utterly forgotten today, a past that built this country, and reminding us of the character it takes to achieve."

"He's offering what?"

"The remembrance that hard work still doesn't guarantee success and that failure might still be the result even through the most valiant efforts. But I'm not defeated if I fall; I'm defeated when I demand success as a given. That means I stop moving forward to achieve and, instead, wait around for someone to give me what I think I deserve. I don't deserve anything. No man does. I don't want anything if I lose. That's the thing that's causing our country to fail. That's the thing that ruined the character of the men Mom loved. They had a culture that told them they should have security and success. It killed their character by eroding their work ethic. When we won't embrace the chance of losing, we embrace the loss of our character. And that's what Bernard is showing here. That's what this fight is about to him - to us."

"Jeez...wow...okay, but what of Wayne Tucker?"

He leaned in close and said, "He's a scumbag. He's the leech that never earned it for himself, has no idea where it comes from, doesn't care that it can be lost - just thinks it's always there - and so he hides his covetousness and greed behind the law. He profits when somebody slips at a chain store or gets fired and cries foul. I'd prefer to live by my word. Men like Wayne have you sign one-hundred page contracts full of ridiculous sub-clauses. He didn't cause it but he profits from it. That's why we can't tell you all the details about the fight, Charlie. It's illegal to do what we're doing, so we have it set up with plausible deniability for all parties. And it's illegal because guys like Wayne have gone and regulated the hell out of everything in life when, in fact, ninety-five percent of the stuff they regulate is no one's business."

"What if there's really no money?"

He shook his head. "Do you think I don't know how to watch out for myself...for us?" There was a stern edge to his voice.

"Okay...yeah. I understand. But what of people that aren't like you?"

He walked over and slugged the bag with a left hook. The crack of it was like a loud shout across the room and the bag's bottom shot upward as the side caved in.

Fiercely, but quietly, he said, "you don't make men stronger by making others weak. Guys like Wayne want to regulate me according to rules that make men weak. Bernard is offering me a chance to live according to my code. That's what I'm gonna do. My life is no one's damn business. It's my risk. It's my skill. It's my business alone."

“Well, it’s all a little...paranoid...if you ask me.”

“Call it by whatever you want, little brother. We’re just covering our tracks so that meddlers and busy-bodies can’t interfere. Guys like Wayne run their mouths about fairness and safety but they don’t know either. All I want is to be left alone to pursue my goals and make decisions that I think will benefit me and you. You don’t see it, but I just want to follow my heart. That should be no one else’s business.

“People today define freedom as forcing everyone else to make sure they get what they need. But more than anything, men need character; give a man without character something and he’ll lose it. It’s the embracing of the possibility of failure that makes a man free, not having his needs guaranteed. Bernard knows that, which is why he’s like he is. Look around. Wayne Tucker doesn’t get it. That’s why he’s parked out there on that boat...with every modern luxury imaginable, I’m sure. Bernard doesn’t want that. He knows that he must keep his discipline and that too much comfort makes a man no good. That’s why he loves boxing. Does that make sense? Do you see it, Charlie? I know it’s all weird but it wouldn’t be if the world was running the way it used to. It’s because everything is supposed to be guaranteed that people whine so much and that’s exactly why something like this stands out. Bernard saw what he wanted to do and he set out to do it in his life. If he had failed he was perfectly content with living with the consequences. He would have had no retirement because he threw every penny into investments. He worked *and* he risked. That was the American spirit. There isn’t a new *spirit* in the country unless you count greed and envy.

That's the new thing and it used to be un-American. Today it's the very thing that politicians sell. They tell a man that he deserves things, not that he should be free to pursue them. The difference in that is all the difference in the world, bro. It's life and death."

I watched him get his stuff together and put his gloves back in a small gym bag. He toweled off and threw a baggy t-shirt on. We walked back to the house and he went up to take a shower and change. I grabbed a seat in the kitchen and started munching on a box of cereal I found in the pantry. I wasn't actually hungry but really had the munchies after spending the last few days with Sam out at the shack. I ate the sugary cereal mindlessly and in deep thought until I was interrupted by Bernard.

He looked sick. His cheeks were frightfully hollow, like they were drained and empty and he appeared to be dehydrated and uncommonly fatigued. I hadn't actually thought about it before - the fact that he was dying - had just accepted it and then moved on with my business. Death and illness hadn't quite touched me at that point in life. I was so young when my mother died and it was an accident, after all, not a steady, sure slide into infinity, so I was totally unfamiliar with death's pitiless march. But just one look at Bernard in the kitchen, even thinner than the last time I'd seen him, his skin pale and ashen, his blue eyes less bright than before, as though they were dimming, and I saw the death that stalks all of us. For some reason or another, after seeing those dimming eyes, I didn't see him as a cancer patient or a terminally ill older man. I saw him as a man whose batteries of life were running out. He was all there;

he was still Bernard. It's just that everything about him was less. What was large was smaller, diminished and weakened. What was bright was dimming. What was loud was tired, weary and quieter. Yes, that's the unmistakable impression I got looking at him. He was simply running down and running out of time.

It was at that moment that I decided I didn't want to know what his ailment was, for I could tell in one look that he wasn't making up stories about his demise. To be so enervated and depleted as he was wasn't a state achieved without help from reality. I didn't want to know because it dawned on me right then that living in this scientific age as we do, we're awfully careful to find out the scientific reasons for everything we can. Does Johnny have trouble focusing in school? Let's forget or ignore the fact that he's 6 and instead plug him full of powerful medications meant and developed to alter the mind. We're so sure that knowing that something is, like cancer or ADHD, means we have it in our cross-hairs. We ignore the fact that knowing something doesn't lend a man to mastery. Science is supposed to rescue us from mystery but I don't think its done that. Despite its advantages, which are manifold, science has not stripped us of mystery because things still end, death still comes and, indeed, death laughs at our knowledge of it. In some cases it lays along the ropes like Ali against Foreman, absorbing wild haymakers, and it taunts us, laughs at us, and knows perfectly that we will perish anyway.

Bernard was going to die. Whatever it was that was killing him was irrelevant. What mattered was that he was

running down and that nature was running its course through him, proving again that we are never masters on earth, just stewards. Life was killing him.

"Hey there, Lusty," he greeted me with energy that surprised me and defied his woeful appearance. Even still, though, he wasn't the same as he'd been. His voice was a little hoarse, his mannerisms slower, like someone had drugged him and he was having trouble staying awake.

"What's up? You okay?"

"Ah, it's nothing. The hand's fine," he waved his hand, which was wrapped in a brown ace bandage. His fingers stuck out of it and were all puffy and fat.

"That's not what I meant. You look a little rough."

"I'm gonna croak soon, kid. What do you expect me to look like?"

I chuckled and took another handful of cereal. He took a seat on one of the stools and looked at me with that mischievous look of his. "Sam's upstairs in my room. We were talking."

"She's pretty broken up about you."

"Yep."

"I love the way that she loves you. It's nice to see. It's nice to see there are people that don't let you down these days."

"Abe hasn't let you down, has he, son?"

"No. No. But he's different...Abe. He's over against all that. But you...and Sam...that's real special. She's real special."

He looked like he was choking up and he lowered his head and turned slightly away so that I wouldn't see him

but I knew. He brought a hand up to his face and wiped at his eye like he was scratching an itch, not erasing a tear and he nodded in agreement, went to say something but nothing came out so he coughed a little to clear his throat.

"Just the same," I continued, figuring I'd spare him the struggle of responding, "this is a special place too. She loves it. The shack, the water...and the spirit of the place. We've walked and rowed all over the place in these past few days. That's why I'm so hungry. I'm not used to this kind of exercise. Anyway, it's a heck of a place to grow up and spend summers."

"She was here every August for the month. Christmas too. Even as a teenager, she'd come. All by herself...just to be here and hang out with an old man that loved her like nothing else in the world."

"Are you okay?"

"Son, listen...you've met her father. He's what happens when the world raises your kids. I thought he was like me. But he loved the power that comes from controlling things that you didn't build."

"He says you're loopy."

"I probably am." He stopped and coughed and rubbed his forehead. He looked overwhelmingly tired and yet he exerted that formidable will that he must have had to live all those years below his means, waiting and hoping, and he used that inner fortitude to stay with me and talk. I appreciated it. My mother had loved me. I was sure of that but her love had been undone by her weakness and that weakness had ruined everything she loved, so one is justified to wonder how much her love was truly worth. I sat

there watching his struggle to stay with me, fighting as time and death had their way with him, and yet he wouldn't leave me until he said what he thought needed to be said. I was in awe of it and, frankly, it made me cry. He didn't notice my tears because he was mostly looking down at the counter, unable to muster enough energy to keep his gaze high. To be in the presence of such a man, a man that knew of the struggle that Abe and I had seen firsthand. seeing someone lose to their vices, and knew that it was the greatest struggle on earth - a man's flesh versus his spirit, his appetites against his heart, his lusts against his honor - to be there watching him was humbling and heartbreaking. I started to wish that I'd known him long ago and had been there with Sam on the island, rowing back and forth from the shack.

"I'm crazy because I did it the old way, son. Wayne does it the way the world does it now. You aren't gonna understand the economics of it but you can get the gist of it. I wouldn't give him anything when he was young. I wanted him to have the character that comes from earning things yourself. He wanted to step in and run the business. I told him to work as an assistant, to cut his teeth, make sure there was coffee in the pot...do it the old way and work his way up. But Wayne..."

"Too good for that?"

He nodded. "We clashed. As you can imagine, he didn't think much of me for freezing him out of the upper tier. So, he was impatient and he hated me. He made friends through some of my contacts and drifted into law. That became his thing.

“Wayne wanted power more than he wanted to do the right thing. When I was growing up I hated not being able to have things. If it was there and I wanted it but couldn’t afford it - man! That was frustrating. It tears at you. But the old code told me to work for it. Wayne went to the same American schools I grew up in but they may as well have been on different planets because he learned to envy. He learned that if there was something he didn’t have it was because someone else - usually me - was freezing him out. He didn’t learn of America like I did. He was raised with class envy even though his father was rich. Isn’t that crazy?”

“Well, the more he wants stuff he hasn’t earned, the more bitter our battles become. He wants a car and I tell him to get a job at the local grocery store and start putting money away. His friends have new cars. I should have moved to a dirt poor section of the country so that those friends of his would be driving junkers and jalopies. Damn! That was my mistake, son. I didn’t see how toxic it was.”

“You were against him going into law?”

“No. I was against him being an entitled piece of crap. By that point we weren’t talking much. I refused to pay for his college. I told him that I’d let him intern at one of my offices so that he could work his way through and he stormed out. Apparently, he got a student loan and a few grants - he was always a good student...a brilliant kid - but hated me for it. My thought has always been that passing the bar was his goal as revenge against me.”

“How?”

“So that he could use the law as a weapon of acquisition.”

"He says that you're broke and that you've been trying to get a big fight together for years to no avail...that the whole thing is just another pipe dream of yours, the hobgoblins of an aging mind."

Bernard laughed and smiled at me though he looked terribly weary and pale.

"You believe that, son?"

"I believe any man that has Sam's heart like you do must be okay."

"She's a miracle, that girl. As true and honest and full of love as any being God ever created. And to think that she came out of that man's home."

"She came from your heart, old man. I can see that. It's clear. For what it's worth, it's clear."

I wasn't expecting his reaction to be so profound. I said what I said only because I believed it but those words pierced him and I saw those blue eyes moisten, his lips quiver and he bowed his head again. He patted me on the shoulder, squeezed just a little in his weariness, and got up to excuse himself. For a long while after he left I thought about my mother.

My whirlwind morning continued when I met Joel Arthur outside on the deck. I had stayed in and nearly finished that box of cereal, I'm ashamed to admit. It doesn't really matter, though because I could eat non-stop and get as much exercise as your average corpse and still stay at this weight. You might hate me for saying that and I do accept the point that my problem of having no luck gaining weight

is far better than the alternative, which is to painfully mind your diet. I don't really worry about what I eat and never have, in fact. It's worth noting, though, that I don't usually eat much because I get full fast. These last few days I was eating a bit less, getting more exercise and, more than likely, my heart rate was probably sky high because of Sam, so I was burning through calories like crazy. But, anyway, I would much rather have my problem than have to deal with obesity and dieting.

Well, after I sheepishly put the box back in the pantry, acting like a thief sneaking his stolen goods back to where he purloined them from, I walked out on the deck, listless and full of sugar. Joel and his wife, Heather, were just coming up the walkway. When they reached the top step they stopped and we all stared at each other somewhat awkwardly for a moment.

"We were going in for a second," he said. "Just looking around..."

"Oh. Yeah...sure."

They told me their names and when I told them who I was we all laughed. He didn't look uncomfortable at all, though, which was rather surprising. I hadn't met an MMA fighter before but I'd seen them on TV. He was bigger and more heavily muscled in the neck, shoulders and chest than Abe, so he had a different kind of presence. Perhaps I expected him to be more surly because men that have those kind of muscles seem to me to be the type of men that are in a bad mood a lot of the time, grunt quite a bit, power drink with their buddies, and generally make life miserable for skinny guys like me by tackling them vigorously and

giving them wedgies. But that's just a stereotype, I presume. He, however, was quite nice and had a very easy manner and big smile, so that surprised me.

Heather was very pretty and was wearing a light tank top over a pair of black yoga pants. She was in great shape with lean, tanned arms and nice, muscular legs with just a hint of the pregnant belly. Her blond hair was full and not sagging in the humid Florida air that seemed to make everything else, even the trees, droop and gasp. He was as tall as Abe, maybe an inch shorter or so, and she was up to his shoulder, which made her as tall as me. Frankly, she looked like she might be stronger.

Joel had that big smile, friendly and energetic. He had a long narrow nose that had obviously never been broken - a rarity in the boxing game where most advanced competitors had noses broad and flat and fleshy due to fists repetitively smacking them in the middle of the face. MMA guys were rarely hit often enough with those little gloves to have that problem so Joel's face looked boyishly handsome. He was red-headed and pale. He'd been a champion wrestler in high-school and was heavily recruited for college - Iowa, Oklahoma, and the like...you know, mid-western colleges where kids grow up wrestling in the cornfields because there's nothing else to do in all that flat space. But he'd eschewed that when he realized he could compete and win in a cage. Upon closer inspection I discovered that his ears were a wee bit misshapen, though they certainly weren't as gnarly as the hideous, shriveled messes that many wrestlers wore like badges of honor.

He had a really easy manner that gave you the impression that you were his buddy even if you hardly knew him. Yeah, he struck me as that big but playful dog you meet in the street and recoil because you think it might kill you by stomping on you but then realize it only wants to be your friend and you're thankful, though you're still cautious because in its exuberance it might still accidentally stomp you. Abe, on the other hand, was the Doberman: sleek, long, loyal, and not a friend to strangers.

Heather was very chatty too and she was going off about how nice Bernard had been and how much they were enjoying the Key, how the area was so unique, quaint and quiet and so on. She was really, really, really nice and wouldn't stop smiling and being beautiful.

Instantly, I didn't like her. Is that weird? Well, hear me out.

I'm not accusing Heather of being duplicitous along the lines of Wayne Tucker or even superficial for that matter. It's just that she struck me as the girl from high-school that was always brilliantly gorgeous, all perfect with her straight, white teeth and blond hair and lovely, athletic body. She was always attractive and always the center of attention and I can't imagine that she didn't know it. And that's the thing - she knew it intimately, comprehensively, and personally. Her beauty and everyone's knowledge of it were central to her understanding of herself and her world. How could it not be? So her amiability wasn't because she was truly that nice but because she was perfectly comfortable with everyone knowing she was so damn beautiful and she knew that there was no rational way that

anyone was going to deny that about her so, instead of being aloof and snobby, which caused its own dramas, she opted to bask in the glow of other's admiration. "Oh, she's so nice," people would say, as if that were something to be proud of, as if being nice was an achievement on par with going to the moon when, in fact, all she was was not a condescending snob.

Oh, and another thing: since when is being nice such a virtue anyway? Why is it that people being nice is often times considered an accomplishment these days? I guess it harkens back to what Bernard and my brother were saying about our society - you know, that no one does things the right way, the old way, anymore, and we're all superficial and spoiled.

But in Heather's case, being distractingly good looking makes it a moral virtue for her to be friendly and I can't stand that. So, yes, you can accuse me of being petty and bitter but that's my position. I didn't like her instantly. It's really easy to be nice to people when you know they're thinking about how great you look. It's not quite so easy when they're thinking, "Who is this dirt poor, hearing impaired, asthmatic, short, weak, contemplative looking, string bean of a fellow?" Try and be forever cheery and outgoing with that!

"I'm Abe's brother," I told her when she asked who I was. Immediately there was that look of, "Oh, well...you're not black...and you look like you couldn't win a fight with a round-card girl." They never say it but it shows on their face.

“Oh, that’s awesome, man, just awesome.” Joel said awesome quite a bit, by the way. He’d used the word several times already in his description of the area. Everything was awesome. “We’re glad to meet you. This is going to be a heck of a fight, eh? Never been done before,” he offered. “I can’t wait. I love doing something that’s never been done before, ya know? MMA is new and all, but everyone’s doing it now. This will be awesome. We’re like total pioneers.”

“You’re Lewis and Clark.”

I swear that he looked at me right then with a confused expression, if only for a second and then it was gone. I’m sure he was thinking, “Lewis and Clark? Were they boxers?”

Well, I’m sorry for being so hard on them. They were truly nice people and I feel somewhat ashamed of myself for ridiculing them like this. In my defense, it’s not easy being nice to someone who wants to bash your brother’s brains in. Moreover, it’s doubly as difficult for me in that there they were, these two outstanding perfect physical specimens, male and female, and their obvious attributes just underscored the unfairness of nature in the dispensation of gifts. Because of Abe I’m always around a field and moving about a world of gifted athletes that can barely string a coherent sentence together much less understand and appreciate the rarity of their gifts in the grand scheme of things. That’s irritating in the extreme because America has become a world obsessed with the outward and physical. Seriously, when was the last time you heard someone brag about someone else’s character or integrity?

The rest of the morning was awkward for me. It was, or so I was told, that rare day in Florida during the summer where it was cloudy and the overcast sky hung low upon our heads, vast gray clouds that gave the day a melancholy, oppressive feel. That was pretty much the way I felt inside too - overcast, uneasy, stormy. I was strangely irritated that Joel and Heather were there, sharing our little oasis - and Wayne Tucker too. The whole thing seemed poisoned to me suddenly and I realized that Sam's downcast mood the other day was quite appropriate given the circumstances. She sat out on the upper deck with Bernard for a bit. I saw them from down below after Joel and his happy, chatty, irritating bride went off to wherever perfect people go. She waved down at me and smiled a smile of sadness like the heaviness of the clouds, knowing that rain was coming and that the storm was going to be bad and there was no way to avoid it. He watched her smile and I saw his emotions swell up as he looked upon her.

She was wearing another dress like the other day when we met. It was thin to the point of nearly being transparent except, of course, it wasn't. It was blue with dark flowers scattered in a pattern that suggested they were windblown. Her hair was down, not tied back, and I noticed how full and dark it was and I watched it glisten under a somber, sunless sky. She wasn't wearing boots today. She wore flip-flops.

I watched them sitting up there for a minute and soaked it in. They were sitting in rocking chairs, facing the water,

holding hands. Maybe it was my imagination but it was as though he had aged another five to ten years since I'd seen him last. That's quite extreme, I know, so perhaps it was just my perception and my own melancholy being projected onto him. Nevertheless, he was changing in my eyes, real or perceived. His vibrancy and enthusiasm had gone out like the tide at night, leaving an empty beach and only memories of what had been there before - robust, dynamic and full. He looked drained sitting next to her. There was no mistaking the sense of sorrow that hung in the air between them. He seemed sorry; Sam seemed quietly terrified.

The entire time I watched them they barely said a word. Only whispers passed. They were two souls that knew each other as the wind knows the waves. So, seeing this for myself, rather than hearing her tell of it back on the water in the refuge and solace of the shack, I became acutely aware of her pending loss. Wayne could say what he wanted but this was all the proof I needed that he was, indeed, a dying man. If he wasn't, and this was all a twisted act of his, an oddball way of getting attention by playing the only card a senior citizen like him could play, then I would hate him with a great vigor for it. I mean it. Dread, loss, terror and aloneness were all etched upon her exquisite, lovely face. There was nowhere for her to go to escape the one thing I could tell she had feared for her whole life, for this old man was the heart of that whole life, he was what she believed in and clung to. A man or a woman can love art, music or poetry; they can love even a sport like boxing. But none of these is the thing we most need: that other soul, in whatever form - father, mother, wife, friend, or grandparent

- that is most pure, most secure, high in honor and love, and that is most assuredly, unreservedly, given in perfect devotion to our felicity.

Bernard was the balm that would heal and soothe the wounds the world inflicted upon her heart. He was the anchor that counteracted the duplicity, shallowness and greed she had in her own home. And now he was leaving and she couldn't follow. They were up above me. I was watching them and I was below. I was looking upon a simplicity and a thing that my own soul was ravenous for as I saw that I had always been that alone as she was going to be. I saw it up there between them - that thing my mother denied me because she was lost to the vices and easy pleasures that rob our souls. Also, it made me think of Abe. The sting of those years past had hardened him and I began to see how his honor and self-control had grown from that sting. He'd never let me down like mom did because he'd never lose his discipline. So, for a moment, I began to perceive how lonely Abe must have always been and I realized that his love was deep, very deep and that he must have always had to keep it bottled up.

I ducked away right as I started to cry and hurried inside and went to my room with the two beds, closed the door tightly, feverishly, as though shutting out the very hounds of hell themselves, and sat there in silence and tried to control my emotions, to push back those tears. After a while, a light rap on my door startled me. "Yeah?" I said.

"Dude...wanna take a ride?" It was Abe.

I tried to fix myself up, compose myself but, seriously, I was a mess. My heart beats in such passions that no

discerning spectator can ever miss what it is I feel at any moment. That's a talent, I think. In a world like ours, it's a talent to be simple, just simple, not hiding anything and I'm proud of it.

I opened the door and he looked at me. He put a hand on my shoulder and said, "What's happened?"

There was no sense hiding it. "I saw Sam outside with Bernard."

"Oh."

"She's gonna be devastated when he dies."

"Oh...yeah...she is."

He must have been thinking that I had grown depressed over Bernard's health and that's what upset me.

"She's got no one else after he dies."

He looked thoughtful and said, "Hold on a minute...go on...meet me at the truck. I'll be down in a minute."

I didn't bother to ask what he was going to do. I went to the bathroom, turned on the cold water and cupped my hands under the faucet, letting it fill my hands and overflow. Then I splashed it on my face, hoping the water would cool the hot thing that was hurting me inside. I splashed once, then twice, then a few more times. I lost count. It didn't work. My hair was wet and I had water on my t-shirt but my mood hadn't been changed.

I didn't have keys to the truck so I stood against it looking off to the water past the road leading to the house. It looked cold though I knew it couldn't be. After a little while Abe came walking out with Sam.

We drove off down the road, past the sleepy town, around the corner, and back to the straight-shot highway

leading back to land. Sam barely said a word the whole way and I watched her from the side mirror of the truck as she sat in the back seat looking wistfully at the memories we passed. There was this expression on her face, a look in her eyes that I thought utterly tragic, as though she was seeing these things for the very last time, even though we would return by the same route.

We pulled into the antique pie place and I looked at Abe weirdly.

"You want pie?" I asked, figuring he was in training and wouldn't eat sweets.

"Figured you guys could use some."

"Oh."

"You ready?" He asked her, starting to open his door.

"He's gonna sell it all," she said, eyes fixed down the road into the vast, endless horizon.

"What?"

"Wayne. My dad. He's gonna sell the whole place."

"After Bernard dies, you mean?"

She nodded without moving her gaze.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. He hates this whole place. He hasn't even come the last several years. He only came this year because he knew..."

"I don't get it," I said. "I mean, your father is a pinhead, but why would he do all that when he knows how much it means to you?"

She sighed, opened her door but didn't get out and said, "Because he's not going to leave him any money."

"What about you?" I asked.

"I don't want anything. I just want...him...to live. I just want these times not to end. But I guess everything has to. And it's not so much the house either - it's the shack. When he dies the town isn't going to let me keep going out there. It's not ours really. It's in the water but it's his...everyone in town knows that it's his and that he loves it because I love it. With Tuck gone...without him here...things will change. People like my father will be in charge. People like him are always in charge when people like Tuck are gone."

Abe walked over and extended his hand to her, to help her step down, as though he were offering his hand for a lady to exit her chariot.

"Milady," he said, "pie heals all wounds."

She laughed probably at the oddball look on his face, which, I admit, was pretty funny considering the fact that he's usually not like that - at least not that I've seen very often. Anyway, she placed her hand in his and stepped out of the truck and stood next to him, looking up at him. He smiled like he knew something and understood it better than she did and knew it would be alright but also that it was perfectly alright to be crestfallen for now. She smiled back, looking at him, studying him, a little surprised by his tenderness.

"It's nice that a fighter can be a sympathetic gentleman," she teased.

"I play with puppies and kiss babies too...when no one's looking."

She laughed and I noticed how their hands lingered. Then we went inside.

The crazy pie lady was there again and I suppose that, owning the place, she had nowhere else to go. She seemed to live in the back and, judging by the front part of the building, being dark and cluttered, and all homey and pie-smelling, I suppose that her living quarters were just as cramped and cluttered. She called out to me as soon as she saw me, her crazy hair still jumping off her head in fantastic spasms of wild pattern, like she had been electrocuted one day while making a pie and this had scrambled her circuits and made her into this fat, eccentric pie-making, antique loving genius.

"Howdy, little fella," she said in a sing-song voice, her big dark eyes jumping happily below her slightly sweating brow. I'm not sure what she was wearing beneath her ultra-large apron because it dwarfed her daily clothes. "I just made your favorite again - sweet potato."

"That's not my favorite."

"You-a silly little man, son...a silly little man," she grimaced and threw down whatever it was she had in her hands at the moment, which I couldn't see behind the counter, and then fussily grabbed the sweet potato pie and put it on the counter. "You just haven't had it enough yet," she said and started cutting a piece. I looked over my shoulder and Abe and Sam were off looking at stuff already, leaving me to deal with her all by myself.

"You've got a lot to learn...a lot to learn." She was cutting and scooping and putting it on a plate as she spoke. "A man loves his dessert best...the one he has right now. You've let this country spoil ya." She handed me a piece on a thick paper plate with a fork. "I already told ya about the

antiques and why you buy them. Do I have to tell ya about the pie too?"

Stuffing my face, I said, "I guess so," except it sounded something like, "ah gep-toe."

"The sweets of life, my boy, are to be savored and the one you get is the one that's your favorite right then and there."

I must have given her a thorough look of perplexity. She came around the counter in a huff, walking in a rapid shuffle of her feet, bending over a bit as though still slicing a pie and wagging a finger at me.

"You don't get it cause no one gets it anymore." She passed me and started to dust with a small hand towel she took out of her apron. I followed dutifully, eating and nodding. "Everyone is expecting things on their terms. Try going for a day without doing that and see what happens."

"What happens?"

"Ya chill out," she said, turning to face me and closing one eye as she said it. "And that's how memories and happiness are made."

"But won't ya just drift along and be bored and broke if you do that?"

"No, son. A man or a woman should do that stuff the good Lord has given them to do and shut up about it. Ya all can't figure that out anymore cause you've been domesticated. Ya think that happiness means having everything you want but that numbs ya and makes ya restless. It's the sweets ya get in life when ya ain't looking for them that mean the most. And that's how these

memories become sweet, not painful.” She pointed at the antiques and swept her finger through the air.

“Ah, a veritable philosophy of pie.”

“Go on, hon...make fun of the old lady. But remember that looking too hard for happiness always means that you miss it.”

Abe turned around when he heard that, for we had worked our way towards the other side of the store where they were looking at albums and magazines along the far wall.

“And why is that?” He asked.

“Cause happiness can’t happen to a heart that ain’t grateful. You youngsters confuse bein’ comfortable with bein’ happy. See, you all’s standing here happy to be looking at this stuff. The memories are sweet and you think of the days you miss and ya all happy inside but ya know something’s missing.”

“That is?”

“That ya don’t know ya wouldn’t be happy if you were back then. And you wouldn’t be happy because you ain’t happy now and right now is gonna be the past that you’ll miss someday. Ya miss this about life, my youngsters, and ya start using the things in life to give happiness but only gratefulness can bring that. The trick is to be grateful anyway, anywhere, anyhow. And that’s the way the Lord Almighty’s wired His world. If ya ungrateful, you’re in misery no matter what.”

We were all speechless and motionless, except for me because I was still chewing.

"Well..." I started, "all that said - I must admit, I don't really like sweet potato pie."

She glared at me and I smiled.

She shuffled off and kept dusting and muttering to herself as we stood there looking at each other and at nothing in particular.

"That was unique," I muttered.

"She's right," Sam said, nodding her head slowly, her hand parked on a stack of records. I looked to see what album was there and it was Eric Carmen, the one with "*I wanna hear it from your lips*" on it.

Abe didn't say anything but he had that look on his face that told me he agreed in essence with Sam. He was looking out the window at the lonely two-lane, watching an occasional car zip by, its tires humming along the asphalt, and moved his lips back and forth in that way he did when he was thinking and not paying you any attention.

"Well," I added, "that's not something you hear at Taco Bell."

Sam laughed and the crazy pie lady came back and said, "You don't say that in here again, little man. I don't care for that kind of talk," and she popped me on the butt with her towel, which stung and almost caused me to lose my plate.

Then, she noticed Sam looking at the old tabletop phonograph near the album collection. It looked weird - yellowish wood with the turntable inside what looked like a big, thick lunch box. It had internal speakers on each side and looked like a perfect fit for the shack in that it seemed old and passed over by modern life.

"I just got that one a few weeks back out in Mount Dora," she said, looking at it with a smile as if she were proud of it. "The father had just died and the kids had a yard sale to get rid of some stuff. It didn't sell."

"Thank God!" Sam said while inspecting the needle and turntable inside the wooden case.

"It sounds like sweet perfection," the pie lady went on. "The father hadn't much used it since his hearing had started to go but had bought it not too long ago, so it doesn't have much mileage on it."

"It's beautiful."

"They were just gonna throw it out when I found it."

"You got lucky."

"Luck seems more likely when one knows what they're looking for."

"I wish I could afford it."

She smiled at her and said, "I wish ya could too, honey."

CHAPTER 7

WHEN WE GOT BACK to the house I was hoping Sam and I could grab some food and retire to the shack for the night. Instead, we walked right into the middle of an argument between Bernard and Sam's parents.

As it happened, we were coming in the side door, the one that led into the kitchen, when Bernard called down from the deck above. He told us to come up to his room - his Pod - as they called it because it was more of a private apartment than a bedroom. Besides the normal features of a bedroom, it had a black leather sofa against the wall next to the double door which led to a wrap around deck, a small wooden table with four chairs, and half of a kitchen with a sink and mini-fridge on the other side of the double doors.

The Pod was rather un-beach like. Dark green walls stole away the light coming in from the three large windows - themselves covered by dusty white blinds. One window was behind the wooden bed, two more around the sofa, and there were glass doors leading to the deck, and a final small, rectangular window above the sink. But all that natural light struggled to illuminate a room with dark

cabinets and hardwood floors. The view, extending out to the side of the town and then into the vast Gulf, appeared like an anomaly - like it was out of place. It was all very much unlike Abe's room, for example, which, though smaller, had baby-blue walls - the kind you'd expect at the beach - and light colored carpeting. The two rooms seemed to me to be in different houses.

As soon as I walked in I thought the Pod was cool, like a small studio apartment you might find in New York, but hardly impressive considering the wealth of the man who owned it. I could see why Wayne found it unimpressive. Up until that point I hadn't seen it and harbored suspicions that Bernard's bedroom was a technological marvel or an upstairs man-cave of epic proportions.

It was boring. The best thing about it was the wrap around deck outside with white plastic lawn furniture.

Well, anyway, Wayne was sitting in the dark brown chair with his back to the double doors. And, by the way, the color of the table and chairs was all wrong - dark, dark brown - like the kind they used in old-style furniture, that sucked up natural light and made me think of old age, boredom, early dinners, and repetitive stories about things and people from long ago that I didn't care about. Pamela, Sam's mother was sitting on the far end of the sofa, legs crossed, and her hand cupped under the side of her chin as her elbow rested on the plush sofa arm. The look on her face showed irritation to an impressive degree and when she saw Sam she looked at her - and at who she was with, which was us, of course - and her expression changed quickly from

irritation to nothing and then back to a deeper irritation in a long second.

Bernard, his hand still wrapped in an ace bandage, was pacing the floor between the little old-person's table and the sink. He seemed to have recovered his energy again, was animated like when I first met him, but didn't look irritated like Pamela did. No, he seemed manic and even happy. I think he derived energy from conflict. He enjoyed it.

Wayne made a face when we walked in - Abe first, followed by Sam and then me.

"Well, here they are," he said with a flip of his hand in the air above his head. "Our daughter with the money-grubbers."

I noticed that Sam's mom nodded her head in approval. Perhaps it's pointless to say, but I was instantly sure I didn't like her. It may not be a fair comparison but she did remind me somewhat of Heather - older and not as pretty, of course - but the same kind of woman except that she wasn't concerned, evidently, with being nice to the aesthetically challenged of the world. She was wearing a short red dress and black heels, for goodness sake. Abe and I were in shorts and t-shirts. And her shoes weren't just high heels... I'm not sure what they were because I'm not much on women's fashion but from the front they had straps on three levels. A thin black line above the toes, a thicker coverage just below the ankle extending to the middle of her foot and then another gap and a last thick black strap on her lower shin. Her blond hair, without any gray that I could see, swayed down across her tanned forehead and

flowed in a slight curl to just past her exposed shoulder. Her lipstick made her lips look strongly red and full. This was how she vacationed apparently.

I also saw Abe's face tighten.

"So bring em on in. Let them hear everything," Wayne went on. "You've got no secrets. Right, Dad?"

Bernard turned to us, shaking his head, "My son and daughter-in-law are convinced that I'm throwing my money away with a fight in order to avoid leaving him any."

"What did he promise you? A 100 million? Two-hundred million? God!"

Abe studied him but remained expressionless except for the heightened focus evident in his dark eyes that probably I alone could see. For everyone else, I think, Abe was always a smidgen intimidating, foreboding, and powerful. If you didn't know that he was a champion boxer it was still the same; those broad shoulders and daunting muscles - lean, long, and ubiquitous - accompanied by his calm severity, set most people back. We live in an informal age where everyone is a "dude" or a "bud" or a "man," not a Mr. But Abe was quite rarely ever addressed by someone who didn't already know him well in such a way and even then it was rare. It wasn't because he put on airs. It was because he moved in a world, and saw it in a way, that others didn't. He saw power and force as the decider in everything. He told me exactly that in the past on several occasions. Not that he's ever thinking of using force against people to get his way but that he understands the world that way and people can sense that about him. *This is a serious man.* Everyone knows without him trying to show it.

That Wayne talked to him like that, therefore, with condescension and open disrespect, was rare for me to see.

"What? You can't talk? You just hit people for a living?"

"It's none of your business what I do with my money," Bernard said and sat down across from him. "That's your whole problem. You think you should be in the middle of everything. But what did you have to do with me getting my money to start with? Nothing. You did nothing and yet you want it. You want the things I've amassed through effort and risk. Well, screw you and screw her," he motioned at Pamela, sitting with regal contempt on the sofa.

Wayne swore and slapped the table. "Do you hear this," he said to Sam, his voice loud, his gestures violent. A vein was throbbing violently in his neck, like he was lifting something under tremendous strain. "This is your real grandfather. Full of secrets...petty, controlling...competitive."

"Why does any of this matter?" Sam yelled. "He's dying. He's dying." She swore too, which so was strange to hear. Profanity from her lips was unnatural - a spot on a perfect white dress or a lone storm cloud in a quiet, tranquil sky. And she started crying too, her face hot and red, and her hands trembled. "Why does this have to be about money when he's dying? Can't you just let him do what he wants?"

"You stupid girl," Pamela said scornfully, shaking her head dismally with frustration and disbelief. "You've bought into all this and you've even bought into these two," she looked at us as though we were two muddy pigs that just came to the dinner table.

"Yeah," Wayne added, "he's gonna blow all this money so that you have nothing - and give it to these money-grubbing barbarians just so he can screw with me."

"I can do whatever I want, Wayne. It's mine."

"What would you do with it anyway, Dad? Wouldn't you sell the property? You hate this place?"

"Why don't you just leave the property to her?" Abe asked, motioning to Sam.

"Ah! Ah! Because...do you wanna tell them, Wayne? Ha! That's what I thought." Then he turned to Abe and said, "When Sam's grandmother passed away I had quite a little legal battle on my hands. You see, I'd put this property into her hands - actually an LLC that she was the sole member of..."

"He used it as a tax shelter," Wayne said.

"So?" Bernard shot his open hands up in the air, palms up, and then he winced because of pain in his injured wrist.

"Does Sam know that? Does Sam know that her precious little jewel here was just a tax shelter and that's it's never meant anything to you other than that?"

"That's crap."

"Whatever."

"Your grandfather is very good at keeping his assets and money hidden, Sam," Pamela said. "After your grandmother's death we found out there were all sorts of LLC's, trusts, foreign accounts, properties...all in her name or corporate names that she owned or was on the board of..."

"The guy has more money and assets stashed in more places...he's a freaking squirrel."

“Ah!” Bernard got up in an explosive start, laughing and exclaiming, “I’m a squirrel...a squirrel,” as he went to the cabinet above the sink. He yanked the little door open and pulled out a jar of salted peanuts. “And I’ve got nuts!”

He laughed like a little kid.

Even with the tension, I laughed too.

Sam laughed reluctantly too.

Wayne put his head in his hands and said, “Nuttier than one too.”

“Yeah, well anyway,” he started again, offering us some nuts, which Abe and Sam declined but I took a few. He poured a bunch in my hand and smiled at me mischievously. “This son-of-a-gun sues me. His mother dies and the stinking rat sues me. Can you believe that? Who sues his own damn father at a moment like that? Who does that? Who?”

“You were planning on never giving us anything.”

“And he calls me crazy...” Bernard said to me. I nodded and chewed some peanuts like I was watching a show and was rather relieved that Wayne’s previous tale was clearly false - there was money at stake and, no, Bernard wasn’t losing his sanity to old age.

“He’s got all these stop-gaps, all these systems and corporations set up,” Wayne explained. “He’s paranoid and vindictive.”

“Vindictive? Me?”

“You were mad at me from the moment I didn’t want to do exactly what you wanted me to do, old man. The minute I wanted to think for myself and do my own thing you were pissed.”

"You call being a professional liar your own thing?"

"See! See! He hates the fact I went into law. He hates the fact that I went my own way. You see, he's all great and loving and helpful when you either do whatever he wants you to do or, like Sam, don't do anything to compete with him. That's the whole thing you need to understand. He wants control."

"Me? You're the one suing because you think you're entitled."

"I'm your damn son! I'm entitled to that. You get to control everything through your money and no one gets to question you. And you're so insecure that you can't countenance your own son wanting to make his own way."

"Keep telling yourself that, Wayne."

"Think about it," he pointed at Abe, "you probably get along just fine with him because you have absolutely no power over him. Right? Right? You can't negotiate crap with him. There's nothing you can offer him. You're totally at his mercy. That's why he chose you for the fight. You don't have anything left in boxing after you screwed over your promoters and alienated everyone. So, he talks about admiring your character for standing up to the corrupt organizations and sticking with your old trainer...that's all so tear-jerker, but he's just using that stuff to get you to think he cares about something other than control. He controls the fight, the purse - the whole thing. There's no sanctioning body, no promoters...nothing to protect you."

"I protect me," Abe said coldly.

"Huh?"

"Don't ever talk to me like I'm a victim."

"Are you serious?" Pamela said from her seat. Wayne was so taken aback that he said nothing and decided it best to go on with the subject and pretend nothing had happened. As much as Abe could make people feel uncomfortable when he was in a good mood, it was especially unsettling when he didn't like you.

"So, he finds situations like this where he has complete control and no one is equal to him."

Abe walked over to the table and stood over Wayne. "Is that what you think of me?" He asked with frightful intensity.

"What? Think of you how?"

"As a chump. As a victim. Is that it?"

"Are you out of your mind? I'm making a point about his selfishness, his narcissism...and deceit."

"So now I'm stupid too."

Abe backed up a step and said, "Stand up."

"Oh my God," I heard Pamela say. "He's crazy."

"What?"

"Stand up."

"I'm not gonna fight you. Are you nuts? I'm twice your age."

"Then you need to choose your words more carefully. Regardless of what you think of me, I don't take too kindly to being characterized as a helpless ignoramus by anyone. It's not very polite."

"Polite?" Pamela muttered more to herself than to the rest of the room. "And threatening to beat up a man twice your age isn't exactly high class."

"I don't know what you call class, ma'am, but I never belittle anyone."

I noticed that Bernard was smiling throughout this, sitting back in his chair, his arms folded across his chest, and he was nodding in agreement with everything Abe said.

"Is it class to call someone names?"

"Listen, young man," Wayne started. It was obvious he was uncomfortable now. He had his left leg crossed over his right and held his hands up pleadingly. His tone wasn't one of complaint or accusation anymore. It was chummier now, careful, and as friendly as I think he could sound in such a situation. I couldn't help but admire how he was able to comport himself under Abe's acrimonious attention. "I'm terribly sorry to have offended you. I didn't mean to say that you were incompetent or stupid or anything like that. It's really simple actually...I'm just pointing out that my father is a genius with money - especially hiding it. I betcha there's some under his mattress." He laughed awkwardly and went on when he noticed that no one else had laughed, especially Abe who was still standing there, looking down at him, hands hanging loosely at his sides. Even still, though, it was *his* hands, those deadly missiles, that drew all of our attention and especially mine because I knew better than they what damage they could do. Sam looked at me with some urgency. The situation was inexplicable to her; she wasn't used to this type of drama. I could tell by the way she was looking at me, with a pleading expression, eyes wide open and full of fear and confusion, that she was really asking, "Would Abe actually hit my father?"

Abe would hit anyone that deserved it. I'm pretty sure of that. And, come to think of it, I think that's why he hadn't come to blows very often in his life: people knew that there was that line never to cross with him. He had a code and it was firm. He never called people names and never used ad hominem attacks and expected the very same courtesy from others. We'd been at a press conference for one of his fights one time and his opponent was really running his mouth, calling Abe all sorts of nasty things. At one point during the opponent's diatribe, Abe, who was seated at the other end of the long table of promoter, managers and fighters, leaned forward and shot the guy a look. That was the moment he'd decided that this was going to be personal and I recall the slow, solemn nod he gave, as though he was confirming an internal dialogue and now the guy's fate was sealed. "Yep, yep...I'm gonna punish him for that." That's what the look and the nod meant. The other guy noticed it and paused for the smallest of seconds but kept right on going. I'm sure that afterward he remembered that look, and that macabre nodding, and he knew it was the precise moment he sealed his fate.

Well, when the fight finally happened, the guy was measuring Abe up, trying to stalk him. He'd been saying for weeks that Abe had never fought anyone that had backed him up, pushed him against the ropes and really took it to him, so that was what he was going to do. He'd said repeatedly that Abe was all speed and flash - the boxing version of a sugar cookie, not a real meal and, therefore, not a real fighter. So, he'd been calling him sugar cookie and saying, "That's the way the cookie crumbles," time and

again during the run up for the fight. Now in the ring, he stalked forward, applying pressure behind head movement and a jab, just like he promised and then, suddenly, with an appalling violence and swiftness, Abe countered one of those jabs with, not one, and not two, but with a three punch combo. If you don't know much about boxing, rest assured that professionals are rarely hit with two clean counters off their jab. To my knowledge, a three punch rejoinder to a jab is as easy as finding Bigfoot.

Right at that point, after the nasty hook-cross-jab counter smacked home, the wrong cookie crumbled. The crowd didn't cheer. They gasped. The sound of Abe's punches weren't like other fighter's. They were like hearing a car accident. Seriously, every time he hit someone clean it made me wince though it was violently beautiful - leather smashing into flesh and making that high pitched whack.

Abe walked to the neutral corner and you could tell he was admonishing himself. He hadn't wanted to hit the guy that hard. Later, he confessed to me that he had tried to pull the last punch - a power jab coming off the cross - but was too eager to hit the poor knucklehead. Anytime he lost control of his emotions it disturbed him. Fortunately (depending upon your perspective) the guy got up, all weak-kneed and shocked, right at the count of nine. He was well known for having a great chin and had never been down before so the ref, perhaps on the strength of his reputation, let the fight go on. If it had been another fighter, he would have stopped it.

Abe came out of the corner slowly, taking his time and, as the loud mouth put his hands up against his face and

pinned his elbows tight against his body, we all expected more fireworks. Instead, Abe greeted him with what were glorified pitty-pat punches, ever so careful not to hurt the guy and to give him a chance to clear his head. Once it became clear what he was doing - carrying the guy so he could smack him around more - the crowd began to laugh and cheer. They'd appreciated his superlative, almost preternatural speed and skill before, but now they saw that he was mean too and they liked that.

That estimation began to change, though, as the rounds passed and Abe continued to put it to him. The guy was tough, though, and wasn't going to give up at any cost, nor would his corner throw in the towel. So this poor guy was carried through five rounds of head snapping jabs...terrible and pulverizing jabs that changed the shape of his face in grotesque ways. He threw hooks and crosses - the power punches - only to the body and with differing levels of power, like he was alternating the volume up and down in order to keep him standing. Each time Abe had him on the verge of collapse, he'd back off and throw soft stuff again, let him get his legs back, and then - whack! - another horrific jab would crack home. It was awful. After the fifth, the guy was sitting on his stool, the one eye that wasn't swollen shut was staring glassily ahead and I doubt that he heard a word his corner said. Not that it mattered because all they were telling him was that he had to suck it up and get inside. Oh, the insanity of it all! They truly believed he still had a puncher's chance.

In boxing there's a very, very thin line between toughness and stupidity and it's up to a guy's corner to not

let their fighter cross it because the other side is populated by broken, abysmal men - once proud and virulent, now mumbling, humbled, decrepit or worse.

But this guy's corner sent him out again. The crowd had stopped seeing it as a spectacle of comedy and fistic justice and had actually begun to implore the ref to stop it. Seriously, when even the drunken savages that sometimes populate such events think the fight is too brutal and one-sided, you've achieved an uncommon level of barbarity.

Thankfully, Abe agreed and early in the next round he swung around to the side of a listless jab and unleashed two vicious body punches - a left hook to the middle and a follow-up right uppercut just under the elbow on the ribs. They sounded like bats cracking into each other. When punches like that land and the noise is that high-pitched it isn't a good thing for the poor sap taking them. Well, he didn't quite go down as much as he sagged to the floor. The ref immediately waved the fight off. Amazingly, the guy's corner protested the stoppage. It's a good thing those guys weren't in charge of Japan at the end of the Second World War or they wouldn't have surrendered until the whole nation was bombed into the stone age.

I heard from some people that knew him that he was in the hospital for a few weeks after the fight. Abe's jab had broken his nose and orbital bone. The jab! With gloves on! A jab! He'd also incurred a cut inside his mouth and had swallowed something like a pint of his own blood.

The body shots had been even worse. He pissed blood for days and the pain was so bad he could only sleep when sedated. He couldn't get out of bed or walk for well over a

week, they told me. And, being a proud fighter, a man of great masculinity, it was reported that he couldn't make love to his wife for two or three months. Now, obviously, I don't know if that's completely true or not, but I wouldn't doubt it.

To my knowledge, that was the last time anyone ever said something personal about Abe.

So, Sam was looking at me like that, incredulous, worried, and so innocent, and I was thankful she didn't know this kind of thing about my brother.

Wayne went on making his case that he hadn't meant to offend anyone and I laughed at that. Abe wasn't budging.

"You didn't mean to offend anyone? Be a man. Stand by your words. You called me greedy. You said I was stupid and helpless. Did you all hear it?"

Only Bernard nodded in the affirmative. I shrugged because I was feeling pretty bad for Wayne and Sam.

"So...what? What? You're gonna beat up an old man?"

It's unlikely that Wayne ever referred to himself thus until it was convenient.

"Your age has nothing to do with it. If you step out in front of a bus, it doesn't matter that you're old. What matters is that you're in front of the bus."

This point helped Wayne see the severity of his situation. He looked over his shoulder at Pamela and she had a look I can only describe as a mixture of haughtiness, disbelief, and scorn. There wasn't a trace of compassion on the visage, I tell you. Watching her watch the situation unfold and straining to see anything resembling human emotion and empathy was like watching a dog listen to a symphony. I

was puzzled and wondered if it was the fact that she couldn't truly comprehend the danger present or if her aloofness was due to not caring what happened to her husband.

Wayne turned his gaze back to Abe when he got nothing helpful from his icy bride.

He apologized flat out at that point. I was stunned - not necessarily at his apology, for I doubted the sincerity of it, of course, but because of his skill at seeming so sincere. One supposes that was why he was a trial lawyer.

"It's just that I'm very upset with my father, okay? It's not right of me to say those things about you, and I'm sorry...very sorry for saying them. It's just that, like I said, he's driving me nuts with this whole thing. It's upsetting. I'm under a great deal of stress. I needed this vacation, let me tell you! I really need to decompress. But, anyway, it's all uncalled for. I'm sorry."

He stood up and extended his hand.

Abe looked at him, then at his hand, then at Pamela and walked back towards us without shaking.

"That's rather rude of you," Wayne complained.

"I have that luxury. I don't live in a world where I have to be dishonest to get by."

"No. Of course not," Pamela said, her voice rich with sarcasm. "You don't need to lie because you can legally assault people. How very honorable."

"Everyone here seems to disapprove of my work."

"Well, are you going to threaten to beat me up too if I speak my mind about boxing?"

Abe chuckled. "Your thoughts about boxing, however negative, won't bother me anymore than your thoughts on chess or volleyball or soccer. But I'd advise you to keep personal attacks out of it."

"You sued Mr. Tucker right after Sam's grandmother died?" I jumped in.

Pamela started to go on about how boxing was just legalized assault and that it encouraged all sorts of social mayhem, from violence to gambling to exploitation of women (not sure how she figured that last one, but she seemed certain). Simultaneously, Wayne launched into an explanation of his lawsuit against his father regarding the estate. By his reasoning it was the logical thing to do since Bernard was burying his assets under every legal and semi-legal rock he could find and that this was both greed and paranoia at its finest. Moreover, he was perfectly content to talk about this and change subjects off of anything having to do with Abe.

"So, you think that boxing encourages social ills and shouldn't be allowed?" Abe asked Pamela, arms crossed in front of his chest, leaning against the wall next to the door.

"It certainly doesn't encourage tolerance and civilization."

Abe laughed.

Upset, she pressed him. "What's so funny? Have you taken so many..." she stopped herself. I guess she was going to make a reference to him being brain damaged, which was laughable because he'd never really been hit squarely - or often enough - to be punch drunk.

Abe said, "You're not being honest with yourself. You can keep telling yourself that you're civilized because you hide behind your appearances, but that doesn't make it true."

Pamela scoffed, tossed her hair with a flippant gesture and re-crossed her legs. "Beating another man senseless is civilized? My goodness..."

"He's a lawyer, right?" He motioned to Wayne.

"Give me a break."

"I'm a fighter. He's a lawyer." The other conversation stopped and now everyone was listening to Abe. "You really think you're the guardians of civilization. I get that. People like you guys have all the right doors open for them. But the best lawyers always knew that if law doesn't rule men, force will. Look what's going on in the country around us...no one cares about the law anymore...just about what they can get. Why do you think that is?"

Wayne found that ridiculous and he was shaking his head incredulously. "You obviously don't like lawyers, young man." He laughed and shook his head at it all. "I don't think I'm responsible for say, global warming, though. Do you? I mean, how bad of a guy do you think I am?"

"Laugh it up," Abe said. "Make your jokes..."

"Maybe if you'd hired me a few years ago I could have spared you your attitude problems."

"That's funny. Really." He turned to Sam and said, "He's making fun of me."

"For what?"

"Well, the reason I'm not boxing anymore is because there were lawsuits after I won my title. My coach, we called him Pep...he was a father to me. He taught me to

box. In many ways, he taught me how to live. Well, he'd been training boxers for years in Schenectady. He was this chubby old white guy that had seen it all. His father brought him to Saratoga Lake to see Dempsey spar back in the twenties. It cost them a buck a head. He was hooked ever thereafter. Anyway, he knew the game inside and out and loved his fighters. He didn't love the promoters and the users though, so he wasn't exactly popular with the powers. The organization chiefs hated him because he moved his fighters the right way and wouldn't send his kids out to be used up for some alphabet organization or promoter. He put us in fights that made sense for us.

"I won the title by beating everyone in the division. They couldn't deny me. Well, right before my first title defense this guy comes out of the woodwork and claims that he loaned Pep money twenty years ago to keep him going when he was broke under the stipulation that he'd get ten percent of future purses. So, all of a sudden there are lawsuits all over the place. The guy's down in the city and he's got a background with one of the sanctioning bodies. It's clearly a bunch of crap."

"He did loan Pep money," Wayne cut in.

"Yeah. He gave money to the gym for more gear and travel expenses to get to the shows. They never signed an agreement for ten percent."

"It was a verbal agreement and there were witnesses."

"Bull. Those witnesses were losers that were in the promoter's pocket."

Wayne laughed.

"There were many convenient coincidences," Bernard said.

"Right. Right. And because they had connections and because Pep hated lawyers and was a simple, honest man, he didn't fight the legal battle well."

"He lost big time," Wayne said to Sam. "And the court ordered Pep to pay back the percentage he owed off of Abe's winnings. But then the old guy dies and the sanctioning bodies concur with the court and order Abe to pay ten percent of future earnings to the guy."

Sam listened in silence.

"But Captain Purity over here doesn't agree with the court...with the law...and vows never to fight again, so he retires."

"He did the honorable thing," Bernard said.

"Honor means defying the court?"

"A crooked one, yes."

"The only man I owed anything was Pep," Abe said sternly. "That case broke his heart. He thought it ruined things for me - sucked the joy out of being champion - and he slipped into a deep depression before he died."

"So, you promised him that you'd never fight again?" Wayne asked.

Abe shook his head. "No. He wouldn't have liked that. It only would have made things worse. I decided after his funeral. Those bastards showed up...like they were old friends. That's when I decided."

"Well, I'm glad you squirreled away enough money to buy a place in Asheville," Wayne said in a tone that didn't sound like he was pleased with it at all. "But if you fight

again - in any way - you're gonna have to answer to the court if you don't pay the ten percent."

"Never. He doesn't deserve a dime. No one deserves anything I don't want to give them. I worked for it. You can sit there and talk about rights and all that - and what you think you're entitled to because you're related to someone. I don't have that type of life. I had nothing. I worked for what I got. So, don't you dare suggest in your lawyerly way that my money was somehow ill-gotten. No one deserved a piece of what I have except me and Pep.

Bernard laughed and smacked his thigh with his good hand. "Amen to that!"

A fury grew in Abe's eyes. "I walked into a boxing gym when I was 13. I'd seen Sugar Ray Leonard defeat Marvin Hagler and said to myself, 'I wanna be able to do that.' So, I went into this boxing gym in Schenectady - a perfect little dive off of State Street, with no parking and bad lighting. Pep owned it. I never knew why we called him that because he wasn't Willie Pep. A lot of us figured it was because he had a great defensive style like Willie had. I didn't know until years later that he'd fought way before Willie did. Anyway, I walked in there and it was the first time I saw the world that your father comes from - and the world that you've been working to destroy."

"I'm aware of your story, son," Wayne said with a sigh.

"I wanna hear it," Sam said and went and took a seat in the chair next to Bernard who smiled at her and patted her knee like she was still a little girl. The cuteness of it made me smile.

“The first day...well, when you walk in, the ring is right in front of you...maybe ten feet. It’s elevated so it’s all you see and it’s intimidating to see one in real life. That’s the only thing I saw when I walked in, not the heavy bags, the lockers, the drinking fountain...nothing. Just the ring. Two guys are working out in there - sparring - and I was mesmerized by the sound and the speed of it. You don’t hear the punches on TV. Not like that. And they’re up above me, right...and they’re moving and faking and punching and all that and it’s so fast, so fast. Fear started to grip me and I thought that there was no way I could do it. When Sugar Ray was making Marvin miss on TV it seemed like fistic ballet, almost perfect and even choreographed. Well, I suppose that I did what every other boy does when he sees great fighters: I put myself in Ray’s shoes and it never crossed my mind that there was pain, time and discipline involved. It never occurs to you when you’re watching it as a kid that there’s a price to pay for being that good.

“So, I start to back out. Next to the door, though, to my left, were lockers and a bench. I hadn’t looked over there so I never saw Pep sitting on the bench. He was in his old t-shirt, with that blue-green button up sweater over it, buttoned to the middle of his chest, and he wore slacks with an old belt from the Montgomery Ward’s down the street with a pair of white sneakers that squeaked when he walked cause they’d gotten soaked once as he walked home in the rain. He dressed like that every day. Every day. That was his only outfit and he washed it in the sink back at his house over on Albany Street where he’d lived since he was born. So, he’s short and hunched over and a little heavy in

the mid-section and he's got a voice that's gravelly and deep.

"Well, I'm backing up and he says, 'you don't wanna walk out, kid.' That startled me. I was embarrassed because I could tell from one look at him that he knew exactly what I was thinking and I didn't like it. So I said, 'I'm late...I'm supposed to be home...I'll come back tomorrow.' There was a guy sitting next to him on the bench, a young boxer, and he was wrapping his hands carefully, slowly and I remember him chuckling. Pep said, 'don't do it, son. You came in here to see if you could box. I can see it in your eyes. You wanna learn and now you see it and you're scared. They're all scared, son. Everyone of em. But don't walk out. I can teach you how to not be scared - how to control it. I can teach you, but you gotta make the decision to stay. You gotta make the decision that your fear ain't greater than your love. It's a discipline, son. I can teach you but you gotta make the decision.'

"I didn't know why at the time but I started to cry when he said that. He had a tenderness in that tough and gruff demeanor. He was a teacher, a leader. He was reaching out. I understand now that I teared up because that was exactly what was wrong with me. I was sick of being scared all the time. I was sick of which one of my mother's boyfriends would be in a bad mood and hit her or me or yell at us and scare us so bad that we'd spend the whole day out at the park, afraid to go home to what was our apartment, not theirs, but we would run because we were afraid. I was sick of it. I was sick of being afraid all the time.

"And there was definite toughness in Pep's voice. You heard it. He was a man that had fought and knew boxing the way a mother knows her children. More than that, he was the first man to ever speak to me like that."

"Like what?" Sam asked.

"With leadership."

"It's all such a sweet story but is there a point somewhere?" Pamela asked.

"I stayed," Abe went on, ignoring Pamela. "He brought me over to the bags, which were on the other side of the ring on the far side of the gym. He said, 'this is Mr. Bag.' And he grabbed my left hand with his old hands and held it up, then pulled it forward quickly, violently from the wrist a couple of times. 'And this is Mr. Jab. Mr. Bag and Mr. Jab are to become very good friends, ya hear me? I want you to step around the bag like this...see? And throw Mr. Jab at Mr. Bag...like this.' He smacked the bag with a few quick, piston like jabs. He could still do it, even in his 80's. 'I don't want you to throw the cross or the hook or anything else. Ya understand, kid?' I said, 'you just want me to hit with the jab.' He barked at me, 'no! You're never hitting the bag. You're working the bag. Ya step, step, jab...like this...like this...' he moved some more and took a breath. 'Ya throw the other stuff before you're ready and you'll be off balance. Ya push your shots and you bring your face closer to the other guy's fists. Like this...' He pushed out a cross, leaning over his front leg and I could see what he meant - he was open for a counter punch. 'Boxing's all about balance, my boy. And balance is about footwork and without footwork a man is no better than a damn heavy bag.'

“So I worked the heavy bag with Mr. Jab just like I’d been instructed. But after a round or so I started to get bored, and my arm started getting tired too. Pep had gone back to sit on the bench and was watching me. Every now and then he’d say, ‘nice...be smooth...don’t try and hit too hard, son...snap it, snap it...keep the damn right hand up against your cheek...you’re a good looking kid - stay that way by keeping your damn hands up’ and so on. Well, I’m a little bored just throwing the jab so I let go of a cross and a hook. Smack-smack. I throw em real quick, right? Right? Even then I was pretty quick, so I’m thinking that it’s no big deal. Well, here he comes - and I mean he’s storming right across the gym at me. His face is red and he’s pissed. ‘Hey!’ he yells at me and then slaps me hard in the back of the head. ‘What did I tell you? Huh? What’d I say?’ I told him what he told me to do and he says, ‘did I tell ya what happens when you throw the other stuff too soon?’ I leaned my face forward and he slapped me real quick. Right on the chin. ‘See?’ He says. ‘See!’ It was a hard, quick slap. It was nasty. I pulled back and was shocked that he rapped me that hard.

“Well, then he goes and tries to smack me again but this time I’m squared up with him and I’m ready for it so he can’t reach me. He tried once, then twice, then a third time and we were moving like we were boxing each other. Me and this 80-something year-old geezer are slap boxing. And he can’t reach me with another shot and then he stops and says, ‘see...see! You keep your balance and it’s hard to hit you. The first time you got smacked by an old-timer and you got smacked not because you suck but because you were

leaning over. You were too close. Once you corrected your balance though...not so easy. And that's the name of the game in boxing - defense. But ya can't fight defensively, son. Ya have to take it to the guy.'

"'Well, how do I do that without leaving myself open?' I asked him. He started laughing and said, 'exactly...exactly. Now you're listening. Now you're learning how to box, kid. You do that by keeping your balance...by keeping things in front of you and not making mistakes. That's why you work the bag. That's why you learn to step and jab and snap it, so that you don't overextend and so that jab is always ready, always between you and the other fellow. You do that and you can box. It's simple, but it ain't easy. The other guy always has the same plan you do - to win - and it ain't working out for one of ya.'"

Bernard was smiling and nodding, so apparently he got the moral to the story. The rest of the room, though, hadn't made the connection.

"And the point?" Wayne asked after exchanging looks with his bride.

"The point, Wayne Tucker, is that when you're a leader you don't tell people that it's okay to do whatever they feel like doing. If Pep had let me do that, if he hadn't yelled at me and smacked me, and explained it to me, I never would have known and someone would have KO'd me sure enough. Certain things are facts of life. You run your life based on what you can get some judge to rule based on who had a better argument. Pep taught me to base my life on the basics - the fundamentals of doing things the right way...the slow way...the boring way."

“Unbelievable. You’re saying...”

“I’m saying that the only guy that was there for me when I needed something is dead now. The only guy that helped me deal with fear - taught me to understand that fear was the thing to be defeated, and that as long as a man conquered his vices and his fear he was free, no matter what his circumstances. That was the only man I owed anything to and it was a debt of honor, paid freely...paid in love. The court and the sanctioning bodies can stick it! I’ll never fight for them. They’ll never get a piece of what we built. Never.”

Bernard started clapping, though he was limited by his hand condition, so he yelled and hooted and hollered like he was in an old-time revival tent or something. “Amen! Amen, brother Abe. You preaching now!”

Pamela stood up in disgust. “This is ridiculous,” she declared and stomped towards the door in her black heels and red dress. “I’m going back to the boat. I’ll turn on Fox News if I wanna hear more sanctimony and feel-good philosophy.”

“So, you don’t care at all that my father has a crackpot dream for a fight and that he’s willing to break all sorts of laws to make it happen?” Wayne asked, shooting a strange look at Pamela as she passed.

“Absolutely.” Abe said without expression.

“See! He admits it,” he called after Pamela as she passed into the hallway, her heels clicking off the wood stairs as she descended, echoing through the house. I noticed that the sound of those heels stopped abruptly, but I was focused on the conversation within the room and only later did I realize

that she never went all the way downstairs. A few moments passed where I heard no noise from the hall and then I heard her coming back up to us again. She popped her head back in the door and she and Wayne exchanged looks that I didn't quite follow - something personal between them. Then he nodded slightly as though he caught the gist of what she was wordlessly conveying and she was off again.

"Yeah, I do admit it," Abe was saying. "I don't hide behind carefully chosen words."

"Well, then why don't you tell me exactly what you're planning with my father then?"

"Cause it's none of your damn business."

Bernard started laughing to himself, small eruptions of amusement that he couldn't contain. Wayne shook his head at him in a way that made it look as though he was the father and Bernard was the misbehaving son.

"Will you - for once - act like an adult?" He said in exasperation to Bernard, gesturing violently with his hands as he spoke.

"I am! You little twerp. I'm not the one that's sticking his nose where it doesn't belong. That's what you did as a kid too. Whenever other kids were playing you had to butt in. That's always been your way."

"This is my family legacy!" Wayne shouted. "Can you get that through your thick head? You do something stupid - and I know you're thinking of it...probably already have it planned - and it's me, Pamela and Sam that are gonna have to deal with the consequences."

“Oh, sure. Sure. You’re concerned about other people.” At this point, Bernard let go of quite a harangue. It wasn’t just a small rejoinder, but a full course meal of hilariously profane denunciations that left me and Abe struggling to stifle our laughter. Sam laughed a little too, which was nice to see, but for the most part she sat there with a hopeless and sour look. She’d heard all of this before and kept looking at the door - agreeing with her mother for once that leaving was a good idea.

Eventually, they all gave up and everyone retreated to their respective spots. Going down the hallway, though, I noticed Wayne stop at Abe’s room - he actually opened the door and looked in. Abe had already gone downstairs.

“I thought I heard someone call me,” he said when I asked what he was doing.

“Seriously?” I said in obvious irritation and noticed that he was still standing there with the door open, looking around, instead of quickly closing it. I was so shocked and he was such a good liar that I didn’t press him.

“What’s he got so much luggage for?”

“You better close the door and mind your own business,” I said in a hushed tone. “You saw him earlier when you insulted him. He’ll be even less cheery if you’re looking through his stuff.”

He kept looking around, especially at the luggage that was sitting on the floor along the wall next to the bed. There were four in all: a black bag that said Everlast in bright yellow letters, and three large suitcases, one of which had a combination lock.

“Why’s that one locked?”

I pushed past him and pulled the door shut. "At this point," I said in a whisper, right in front of him, eyeball to eyeball, "I'd have to say that you almost deserve what he might do to you, though I never wish that on anyone. But in your case..."

"Ah!" He waved his hand at me in a huff and turned away, departing down the staircase.

Sam was behind me and I turned to her, exasperated. "Are you kidding me?" I said. "He's really like this? Did that just happen?"

"He thinks everything belongs to him," she said without emotion, speaking as plainly as a robot would. "He always has. He demands to know everything you have going on and I mean everything, but he never tells you anything about himself."

I could see why she liked the shack so much.

CHAPTER 8

LATER THAT NIGHT she and I were back out on the water. The sky had cleared and there were no more clouds and the sun was getting low, looking heavy in the sky. We sat on the floor as we had on previous nights, listening to the music, not saying much, and enjoying the breeze coming through the screens, which made her lacy curtains flow in gentle dances that were soothing to watch. I listened to the lines of poetry, draped in music, and though I'd heard them many times before, they moved me to put my arm around her, just to be closer and not be so lonesome in the music and the breeze and the dancing lace. It must have moved her because she put her head on a pillow in my lap and I stroked her soft, dark hair and let the music and the air have their way with me. It was all so much magic - that moment; there was melancholy, which was sweet, and there was the purest and simplest of romances of being there with her, running my fingers through her hair and that was all. We were just a boy and a girl listening to music in the quiet Gulf, saying no words, and trusting each other intrinsically.

Ever thereafter, upon drifting to sleep in my own bed, whenever I was without her, I would think of that moment, its simplicity and power, and wonder about it all. You see, in my mind, as I'd fall into rest, I would wonder if any of these could exist without the other. There was Sam, my beautiful lady, her hair catching the Gulf's pink light of the setting sun, and there was that little gray shack, tilted and decrepit and somehow perfect on its thin legs in the water, and there was the music. It was as though I couldn't see the one without the other. Could I love her quite so much, so fervently and ardently, back in Asheville under a winter sun with a biting wind rushing down across the mountains, leaves fallen, trees bare? Was this all a perfection that ruined the rest of the world? Isn't so sweet a romance actually a curse because, in its surreal divinity and perfection, doesn't it obliterate the charms of lesser days? Because of this I would ache deep in my heart when I was alone and drifting in thought or falling asleep - you know... in those midnight moments of repose where reality and dreams mix and mingle, twist and turn, and you can't tell anymore where you are in time and space. I would ache so deep in the quiet and aloneness because I'd held the moments in my hands that are only meant for dreams and seem so fragile yet are really too powerful because they overwhelm everything else that is mundane, daily, common. Sam was what brought the shack to life; the shack was what defined Sam; the music was the soul of the beauty of both.

I got to hold them all in my hands. I was, I was...the luckiest man ever to live as I held her, and loved her, and

smelled the warm salt water all around us, and my ears and heart were full of enchanting songs of long ago.

"I knew the shack wasn't going to stay," she said as she lay in my lap, face turned away from me, facing the spinning record. "Every time I came back it was weaker...looked older...and closer to being under the sea. I always knew it...always feared it."

"I think it'll be okay for a bit. Maybe you can have someone come to work on it - stabilize it."

"No," she sighed, speaking so soft that her musical voice was nearly lost to the album, the breeze, and the fluttering wings of the birds outside on the roof. "It's something I've wondered about other people, Charlie."

"What?"

"How they did it."

"Did what?"

"Moved along with the changes and the loss of life's best things. I've always watched them and thought it was because they didn't care for the things that I did - like I did - and so I haven't trusted them. I haven't trusted them because I think there's a connection between the two - the not wanting to keep the simple and precious and the actual loss of them. I really do think that. Maybe it's unfair and maybe I shouldn't put all that in my parent's account, but I do. You heard them. They don't care for anything that I care about."

"You have a point, I think," I whispered back, my hand stroking her hair in smooth strokes over her ear.

"I trust you, though, Charlie."

I smiled and said, "Your mother doesn't think you should."

She rolled over and looked up at me. Her brown eyes weary, the whites of them reddened in the pink and purple twilight. "Can Abe defeat this guy...Joel?"

I shrugged and made a face. "There's no way to know for certain. I hope so. There's no such thing as certainty in a fight. He's always taught me that...and yet, frankly, I can't imagine him losing."

"His wife, Heather, was saying that this was a whole new game for a boxer. An MMA fighter is better prepared for an all-out fight than a boxer. She said that Abe's in over his head."

"She said that?"

"Pretty much."

"Are you worried that he'll lose?"

She nodded.

"I thought you didn't like him."

She shook her head. "You love him. And what you've told me about him - and what he said earlier made me change my mind. He isn't what I thought he was. Plus, if he had been that, there was no way that you could be what you are."

"You're the way you are despite your parents."

"I had Bernard. I had this. Who did Abe have, Charlie?"

"Pep. It was Pep."

"Tell me about him...about Pep. He was like a father to Abe?"

"No. Like a grandfather. Like a grandfather that slaps you in the head a lot."

"He's dead."

I nodded and realized that I was starving. "Let me row back to the house and get something to eat. Unless you wanna just go for dinner now."

She shook her head. "I don't wanna go to the house tonight. Go, and tell me more about Pep when you come back."

"Sure. What do you want?"

"There's pretzels in the cabinet. Bring the pretzels. I'd love some coffee too. Maybe later we can row into town and get some coffee. There's a place that's open late. It's really an ice-cream place but she makes coffee for me when I want. We can sit in the corner near a table with assorted newspapers and drink some coffee and eat a cookie."

"That's dinner?"

She grinned and it was good to see her look happy again.

"Don't you want to see Bernard every chance you get?"

I was sorry I asked that. It was stupid of me. Her smile vanished from her winsome, perfect and kissable lips.

"He has a nurse coming in now and then. He said that when it gets closer, she'll stay with him. Plus, he's still working when he can. It's probably best that way."

"Sorry."

"It's okay."

"So, pretzels and water." I got up, stretched my legs and arms that were aching stiff from not having moved for an hour.

"I'm sorry that you lost your mother so young, Charlie. I've been very selfish."

I opened the door and heard the birds from the roof fly off in response, wings carrying them up into the warm, orange sky and out towards a distant and hazy purple cloud that stretched back toward the town, which was dark with only dots of yellow light streaming across the black water.

I stopped and said, "That was so long ago. I was so young. It seems that pain from such things is in proportion to the depth of the knowledge of the loss."

She looked at me strangely, sweetly and smiled in a way that only a woman can smile, full of deep, unspeakable compassion. To see that smile was to know that you were loved, not pitied, not overlooked, not misunderstood, but absolutely loved and appreciated.

"There was depth there, Charlie. So much depth. But you were a child and you didn't understand it. But it's there. It's always there and it's forming you day by day - and it's led you here to me today. You haven't understood it totally and had you, it may have caused you to feel sorry for yourself and that would have ruined you. Instead, it's formed you and made you."

"And what am I?"

Again, there was a smile and that smile was one that knew the intent of my query, knew that it wasn't an intensely personal question, but one that included her too. Sitting on the floor among the soft pillows, she looked at me in the doorway, the setting sun painting the Gulf sky behind me impossible colors, probably obscuring me in its heavenly glory, and she shook her head sweetly.

“Well, you’re my best friend, Charlie.”

There. She said it. It was out there.

She got up and walked to me, put my warm face between her delicate hands and kissed me. The kiss was short, short, and soft. My hands never came up from my sides. It was her moment to command. When her lips left mine, parting with gentleness and compassion, letting me linger there in ecstasy and in the faint hope - like that of the vanishing sun - that this kiss was more than what her previous words were. Her fingers slid off my face slowly, like her moist, soft lips, and I rolled my head a little, trying to keep them upon me, trying to prolong the hope, delay the emptiness of reality setting in as it had before, long ago. I’d always looked at the front door of whatever house I lived in, whenever I was sitting on a couch or chair, and half-expected, half-hoped, for my mother to open that door and enter my life again. I would see her face looking at me, a smile on her lips that would say it was all okay and that it had never been my fault that she had raced away that night, in anger, in self-hatred, and crashed. It was a look and a smile that would see through my years of remorse and tell me that little boys play and make noise and that was all just okay, that I couldn’t be blamed for the terrors that lurked in the hearts of broken adults and that they had had no right to savage my childhood with those terrors; that it was their responsibility, not mine. She’d stand in the doorway and smile and the tears would come upon me in dreadful waves, overwhelming me, a flood, a deluge. She’d never say anything in this vision of mine; just stand there and smile and that was all I’d need to see because it would

tell me that little boys can't be made to bear the horrendous burden that adult vices, anger and pride sometimes thrust upon them.

This was the emptiness that I'd open my eyes too. My mother was still gone - always gone. And Sam's kiss would be over.

I didn't open my eyes.

I heard her say, "...best friends...friends so special they are closer and deeper than family."

I never looked up, but held myself together until I was in the boat and began to row with my back to her and the shack. Then the deluge started and it came on and on with a terrible intensity as deep and full as ever before.

CHAPTER 9

WHEN I PULLED the boat against the dock and looped the thick, coarse rope around the top step and climbed up, I saw Bernard sitting alone in the gazebo and the dark. He'd been watching me approach and knew that I'd been crying, for there was no chance of hiding a storm of emotion so vast as that and, frankly, by that point, I didn't really care who saw me. It was Sam that I wanted to protect from my reaction. If she saw it, and knew how deep was my anguish, I wondered if there was any way our special thing could go on unchanged. I'd even got to thinking how during storms the sea would become choppy, unsettled, and rough but it was not changed in its essence. Afterwards, when the sun and stars shone down upon it again, the sea was settled and there were no remnants of the previous tempest. I thought that this was what I wanted for us; a storm might come but we would abide afterwards like the sea - unchanged.

Bernard met me at the edge of the dock. I watched him move toward me in his slowness and apparent fatigue. It seemed that he was changing from hour to hour, more life draining from him by every tick of the clock and he was

visibly that much closer to his wooden box or small urn or whatever it was he had chosen. He came up and stood beside me without saying a word and we stood looking out at the dark water and the dim light left in the sky. It was neither light nor yet dark. He patted me on the back - leaving the hand on my shoulder and rubbing it a little, which let me know that he knew the source of my agonies. Regardless of what Wayne said about him, it was things like this, moments when a dying man isn't thinking about his own affairs but has time for a young man's love life, that tell you more than anything he can say. This was a thought that occurred to me quite a bit later when I looked back on it. At the time I was only thinking about her and my own pain, my own desperation and aloneness.

"She's an easy girl to love," he said, his tone low, full of understanding and even a bit of reverence, as though he knew and respected well the weight of the things of which we spoke.

I nodded, sighed, my throat swelling and I swallowed hard, fighting to keep it together.

"She's such a lovely, lovely girl," he went on. "I knew by the way you were looking at her back in Atlanta that when you actually met her you'd fall in love completely."

He squeezed my shoulder with his hand and it was his injured one, so I figured that it was feeling better or that he was jacked up on pain meds. Either way, he moved it around without any hint of pain.

"Having your heart broken sucks," he said with a heavy tone and a sigh. We stood there like that, his hand on my shoulder, patting me and consoling me like the father I

never had, and we watched the night come on over the water and take hold of us, wrapping us in silence and darkness together. Then, with a quick change of tone, he turned to face me, hand still on my shoulder. "Listen," he said, "a piece of advice..."

I turned my head to see him in the dark and saw those strong blue eyes, shining out brightly even in the night and out over a face of advanced age. They were focused on me with their full and passionate might, undiminished by the years and the death that ate at him from within.

"Women..." he said, "already have a pussy. They don't need another one."

He patted me again with more vigor and gripped my neck and shoulder with greater strength than before. He wasn't joking but I couldn't keep down a short laugh at the impertinence of it.

"You understand. Goodnight, kid."

"Goodnight, Mr. Tucker. Hey..." he stopped and turned back and was a few steps from me. "...and thanks."

I couldn't see his face at that distance but I saw him nod to me. I can't tell you exactly why I wasn't offended at what he said. He had a way about him that was silly, irreverent and sincere all at once. He was like a grown man and a big kid, a wise elder and a grandfather spoiling his grandchildren, playing games with them when it was late and they should be in bed. That was the impression I always got from him. There were no airs. He didn't have an agenda. He wasn't the type to hassle you over small details when he himself was failing in large ones. So, because of

this, it was easy to trust him and not be offended by such quirkiness. He was real.

Also, one has to admit that watching me weep as I crossed the water probably didn't inspire great confidence in my masculine virtues. I can't imagine Abe ever doing that. He and a girlfriend broke up a few years back - I never knew precisely why - and I don't recall him ever looking upset. Sure, he sulked for a bit and there was an uncommon tension about him. For a few weeks it was as though he was unnaturally bored with things. He'd turn a movie on and then shut it off halfway through. And he left a lot of half read things lying around - magazines, newspapers, newsletters - that I'd never seen him read in the past. This was the extent of his malaise. He worked out more; his runs were longer and he'd come home sweatier and more tired than I'd usually see him. Perhaps that was where his anger and hurt went. Perhaps, instead of tears and self-sorrow, he punished his body and the heavy bags and hand pads at the gym. Maybe.

Either way, I didn't mind what Bernard said, even though there was no way in creation that Abe would have ever heard those words. Sometimes I wished I was him and, when I thought about it for a moment, I could begin to see more clearly why those two got along so famously. Bernard was a little like Pep had been, I suppose.

When I went up to the house, ambling silently up the long wooden walkway that connected the back deck to the dock and gazebo, ducking under the low branches of the big tree

at the halfway point that someone really needed to trim, I did so as if in a trance. I was going in for pretzels and water. I'd go in, get them and then walk back to the boat, placing them at my feet, and then row back to the shack like it was the most common thing in the world and yet, I knew, that none of this was common at all. It was happening so fast and yet nothing had really happened - the fight especially. Sam had just asked about it and, frankly, I was taken aback by it because it hadn't crossed my mind in a while. My envelopment in the rapture that was Sam and the shack had simply overwhelmed everything else and as I walked in the humid night I hoped to God that Abe wasn't similarly distracted by the strange events, for he was indeed in for a battle unlike any he'd ever had before.

All of this was going through my mind as I went in, grabbed our necessities, and then came back out.

"Hey," a voice called to me in the darkness from elsewhere on the deck. I looked and saw someone sitting alone near the windows, back away from the door, to my left. "Got a minute?"

It was Sam's mother.

I shook my head and squinted, like that would improve my night vision so well that the vision of Pamela would give way to, well...I don't know...maybe, Abe or Sam - anyone but Pamela.

I did this but still she remained - sitting there looking at me, in a darker dress than before, even more snug than the little red one. She waved me over. "Take a seat. Take a seat. You don't need to be afraid of me. It's alright, Charlie."

She had a large coffee cup and took a slow, lingering sip of it. I didn't smell coffee and, when I got close enough and sat across from her in the rickety plastic chair, and looked deeply at her, I could see that her eyes looked weird. They were glassy and she and her eyes both appeared slightly out of focus. I stayed fairly well away from drunk people most of the time and wasn't exactly an expert at knowing when someone was toast but she certainly seemed a few sheets to the wind (whatever that means). Her dress was either navy blue or black. I couldn't tell in the night's sparse light.

She motioned to the blue bag of pretzels and the bottle of water. "Going back out there?"

"Yeah. She's expecting me."

"That's cool, Charlie. She's a smart girl. I've never given her enough credit. She's got you coming and going. That's smart. I'm sitting here alone. Drinking in the dark on this crappy porch and she's got you coming and going. That's sweet, Charlie. I'm happy she has you right now."

"Why are you out here? Why aren't you on your boat?"

She took a deep draught and dropped her head as she brought the cup back down to the table and then she laughed. "Vacations are the worst, Charlie. It's not so bad when he's working. I can stay busy. But out here..." she looked around spitefully and then tossed her hair with a frustrated sigh. "I should've stayed in Orlando but I wanted to see Sam at least. A mother wants to see her daughter, you know."

"Where's your husband?"

A deep expression churned across her troubled countenance and I can't say that I could make any sense whatsoever out of it. In that moment, to my surprise, I felt extraordinarily naive and inexperienced.

"He's back on the boat, Charlie."

"Oh. Okay. Is everything alright? Are you mad at him or something?"

"You're sweet, Charlie. Oh, my God, you're sweet. She's got you coming and going and you're so sweet. That girl really is smarter than I gave her credit for. You know, people say that I married for money. They say that I married for the position...the power. What power do I have? Hmmm? What can I do? Sam's got you rowing around the Gulf and running errands for her and I bet she hasn't even given you any."

"Pardon?"

"Oh, my!" She reached across the table and took my hands in her own. She had large rings on both hands that caught the dim light of the moon. "Charlie. Charlie."

I was getting irritated at the way she kept saying my name with a slow, deliberate cadence and with her eyes closing slightly. She was all sleepy and friendly.

"Well, at least you're not a mean drunk."

"Oh, Charlie. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you. Surely, I didn't. You just...you're just a breath of fresh air. Everyone's got their agenda and you're just a sweet, sweet boy."

"You have an agenda."

"No. No." She was shaking her head like she was thinking about it. "No, Charlie. I'm just...complicated. That

doesn't mean I have an agenda."

"Complicated? Is that what you call it?"

"Call what?"

"Being condescending and pretentious."

She looked at me with her eyes wide and a smile hanging on her lips.

"You asked," I said. "No offense."

She stood up and the chair scraped across the wood deck. She tugged at the bottom of her dress, which was closer to her nether region than her knees, and straightened it. Then, I'd say she sauntered over but she was pretty drunk and she didn't really saunter so much as she stumbled along the circular table over to me.

"Oh, you know..." she said, standing in front of me so that I was eye level with her chest, which was, well, quite awkward. "I can't say that I blame you for thinking that, Charlie." She leaned forward and was right in my face. "But what if I told you a secret? Would that change your opinion of me? Would that make you think that I wasn't...?"

"Superficial?"

"Condescending and pretentious."

"That too," I smiled.

"You're funny."

"What secret?"

She moved away and walked to the edge of the deck and leaned back against the railing.

"Do you think I'm still attractive, Charlie?"

"Pardon?"

"You heard me. I'm gonna be 50 in a few months but I take good care of myself. I have a personal trainer...my

diet's awesome."

"You're a very pretty woman, Mrs. Tucker."

"Mrs. Tucker? Ah! The hell with that, Charlie. You're a young guy. Tell me the truth. I just wanna hear the truth. Am I still hot?"

"Are you kidding me?" I got up from my seat and gathered the water and pretzels.

"Charlie. Please." She stopped me and blocked my path to the gazebo. She was whispering and I could smell her sweet, strong perfume, heavy in the night air. "Have some compassion. Forget about all the other stuff. Forget about all that. I'm just a woman asking a young man if she's still pretty. That's all. Please, Charlie."

I stuttered for a second and said, "No matter what I say, you won't believe me at this point."

"Yes, I will. You're honest. Everyone can see that. That's why Wayne wanted to talk to you earlier. He could see that you're an honest young man. Say what you will and I'll believe it."

"Okay," I said, clearing my throat and shifting my weight back and forth like I was a nervous toddler. "Okay. I'll say this: you're pretty but not attractive."

She studied me for a second, changing the angle of her stare and looking deeply at me. At one point she was close enough to kiss and, for that moment, I swear, I thought she might just lay one on me. Instead, she pulled back and said, "You mean you don't approve of me."

"I guess."

"How do you have a right to judge me, Charlie? Do you think that it's possible that a young girl gets married and

she didn't make the best decision? Do you think it's possible that maybe I envy Sam because she's living her life the way I should have? Do you think that's possible for me? Do you think it's possible that I hate all the pretense and fabrication that is my life - and Wayne's?"

"Is that your secret?"

She shook her head and paced. "Could it have been? Wasn't it obvious?"

"No, ma'am. I hadn't thought any of that."

"Would knowing it make me more attractive?"

Chuckling awkwardly, I said, "I guess so. Yeah."

She walked over and hugged me - really hugged me.

I must say that in all my life I hadn't had much drama like this. Abe had his fights; he had his fistic dramas and all the stuff with the boxing commissions, the lawyers, and Pep dying but I was always a bystander with it all, just a witness. This, though, was another thing altogether. It was the first time in my whole life that I had become the center of anything. So, I stood there holding her - and, yes, she was quite pretty - and her hair was covering my nose and mouth so I moved it away with a gentle, uncertain hand. This, she took as a gesture of affection so she turned her head more into my shoulder and gave herself more into the embrace and it felt, for some reason, almost as though we were dancing there on the deck in the dark night. I was rather enjoying myself for it was fun to be involved at last. This whole fight wasn't a thing I was observing. I wasn't just Abe's little brother - the thoughtful and aloof eccentric that didn't hear too well and was merely along for the ride; I was in the thick of things with important people. She was

hugging me for her own reasons and was apparently getting something out of me that she needed. In that way we stayed there and used each other a little bit.

She started whispering something but with her face turned away and being that she was on my bad side, I couldn't hear her too well. She said something about Wayne having his "young things." That made me nervous because I started to seriously wonder if she intended to make me one of her young things. Thankfully, she didn't make a serious pass at me and I was able to turn her around and get her on my other shoulder where I heard her say that, well, basically, she was happy to know that she was still desirable. I must admit that this was something that caught me totally by surprise because I never would have thought Pamela was insecure in the least, much less would care what I thought.

But who knows how much of this was the result of alcohol.

We stayed there like that, dancing with nearly no motion and without song except for the low remnants of melody floating across the water from the shack. She went on whispering things to me about Wayne and about the regrets that she wasn't young enough to do it all over. I told her that I couldn't see why she stayed with someone that wasn't faithful. She replied, "It's always something, Charlie. There's always a reason. We have money...but divorced...it's easier this way...I think."

"So, you'd rather be lonely and cheated on?"

"There are worse things."

"What's worse than living a lie?"

She turned her face back to me and smiled as if she'd just found something very precious. For a moment she didn't seem to know what to do and then she kissed me - right next to the lips on the cheek. It wasn't a kiss a mother gives a son; it wasn't a peck on the cheek. But it wasn't on the lips fully either. I was confounded again - for the second time in the night. This time, I already had my arms around her in that hugging/dancing thing we were doing. I wanted to push her away but everything was conspiring against me. Truly, I wish I had. I'm sure that Abe would have had no trouble getting rid of her. But she seemed to be so heartbroken. She seemed like all she needed was a kiss from a man and warmth from an embrace to remind her that she was still alive. Plus, like I've said, this was all new to me; I was never the object of any woman's attention, much less a woman so mature and beautiful and soft. I felt her fingers along the back of my neck, moving slowly, tenderly, running up into my hair and then back down to my bare skin and all of my nerves were jumping. Outside, there was stillness - the breeze, the calm Gulf water, and the sweet, humid air; inside, I was on fire. I wanted to pull away. I was embarrassed and scared and frozen.

I was hoping that she'd go further at the same time that I was relieved when she pulled back. The warm, soft, moist remnant of her lips were still present on my cheek and I felt like I was in a trance and I dropped the water and the pretzels. The bottle rolled off and I heard it come to a stop against a nearby chair, though I never looked for it. She smiled at me - a smile of satisfaction and I couldn't figure out what she seemed so satisfied with because I hadn't

done anything. Maybe she was just happy now. Maybe this was what she needed to feel like a woman again, though I'm embarrassed to even think that because I've never thought of myself as the type of guy that helped women feel like women. But why not me?

"Don't you need to go see Sam?"

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. Yeah."

She stepped back and helped me pick up the water and the pretzels.

"Charlie?"

"Yeah."

"Don't underestimate Wayne."

Confused, I replied, "I don't. I don't underestimate anyone, I think."

She smiled again and said goodnight.

CHAPTER 10

SAM WAS asleep amidst the cushions and pillows by the time I returned. I wasn't surprised because the music had stopped shortly after I put the oars in the water and hadn't come back on again.

I turned the knob on the battery powered lantern. Too much light flooded the room at first, so I adjusted the brightness until there was only a thin light within the shack, not enough to overwhelm nature's lights from outside, that of the moon and stars overhead. Then I walked over to the record player and changed LP's. I put *The Wild Heart* back on in hope of recapturing the magic of our first night. At first I wasn't sure why but suddenly I was looking around and everything wasn't ours anymore - it was hers. I hadn't felt that distinction before, which was odd when I thought about it. Who goes into such a new and mysterious environment and immediately assumes that it's their own? That's exactly what I'd done with Sam and the shack and the music. From that first night, even from the moment she rowed out to me, it was as though we were always together

and there were no separations, no distinctions. She and the shack had been waiting for me.

But now, as I watched her sleep, that big fuzzy lion sitting up next to her, like he was keeping watch, I thought that the whole place wasn't mine anymore. Sam's kiss had left me forlorn and despondent; her mother's left me feeling like I'd betrayed her - her, whom I didn't have but couldn't betray. That was my conundrum.

Once the music started she rolled over and opened her eyes and looked at me.

"I was worried about you," she said in that song-like voice. Just the sound of it hurt me. Her mother's voice wasn't like that. It was harder, colder. Pamela was like winter on a summer night.

She sat up and opened the water that I had put down next to her and took a sip. "Are you okay? You look weird. Are you upset?"

I told her about seeing Bernard and about what he said. She laughed and nearly spit the water out she'd just drank. "Oh, Charlie. Oh! I'm sorry. I don't mean to hurt you, honey."

"I saw your mother too."

"My mom?"

I told her the specifics and then said, "And she kissed me."

There was a part of me that was hoping she would brush this statement off with an air of resignation, an acceptance of the fact that her mother was flighty, unpredictable, a floozy when drunk, or something like that. Instead, and much to my chagrin, Sam stared at me for long, painful

moments. Her expression was unmistakable. She was wounded. There was no malice in that wondrous face, no dark mood eclipsing the many glories that she was, and yet she was clearly and regrettably hurt. The music was playing, Stevie was singing and, just like that, she was looking at me as though I was not any longer the man I was hours before. I had fallen in her eyes by allowing her mother to intrude on what was ours and she was looking at me with hurt in her eyes. She'd sent me on a simple errand but in matters of heart, where one's trust goes always and is the most precious cargo of all, there is no such thing as value-free action. All actions have consequences. I saw this in her eyes; it was written on her face.

I thought to rise up and make a defense for myself but that was futile in that I knew too that what I did was done out of weakness. A woman can't trust that kind of weakness. I'd left the shack firmly in her honor, though not in her passions, and that was somewhat a mystery but no longer. Sam was stronger than I had perceived; I was weaker than I had known. To let Pamela embrace me, to kiss me, to command me in a moment - it was all a breakdown of Sam's defense. Pamela had lost her daughter's respect somewhere in the past. To regain that which was gone, was atrophied, was smashed, required specific steps. To restore anything requires a price and Pamela refused to pay it - to pay in the currency of repentance, humility, and truth. None of these had she offered or she would have said as much to me earlier. She played a victim and yet she was a victim only of the consequences of her actions. Sam was here for her if she were honest. But that drunken charade was

merely her ruse to barge in on that which she couldn't otherwise enter. Thrown out of the cathedral, she smuggled her garbage in to defile it. That was all. I saw it in Sam's calmness and dejection. Pamela hated her daughter, held her and her virtues in utter contempt. I couldn't be sure how much of what she said was a complete ruse - perhaps there were elements of truth to it - but her actions were all intended to diminish Sam's world. She hated it. That was the look on her face earlier when everyone was arguing...it was anger and hatred.

All of this I began to deduce as we looked at each other in quiet. Even the wind had stopped. What I'd perceived previously as fragility was nothing of the sort; in fact, it required a great and resounding toughness to hold fast against her parent's world. That was why her mourning for Bernard's health was so vast and depthless, for he was that person who was unmoved by the vice and duplicity of life, which was all so much pragmatism and politics. Sam had held fast against the easy and seductive enticements of a life offering splendor, luxury, and distinction among the elite. She had built a fortress of ideas and beauty and melodies and here it was. She had brought me into it thinking that I was its equal and I may have been, but I was blind to the those that hated her fortress. I liked being important for a little while and I liked being physically desired and needed. For all of this - I saw now - I had traded the spirit for the flesh. I had exchanged the things for which she lived for my weakness. At last, I saw the cracks that start the collapse of the bridges of love between men and women.

Yes. I saw it. It was there - not *out there* somewhere. The broken bridge started with me this time.

I could have lived with my lie and my weakness, I'm sad to admit. That seems to be the way such things run in the world. I could have done that. But when I saw it on her face, the uneasiness within me, which was heretofore nameless and vague, burst out into the open and was clear. My momentary trespass had violated her trust because it was that trust that held the key to those very precious things in her matchless heart. Seeing this, there was no way to negate the impact of what I'd done in weakness and I saw, so greatly to my deep horror and dismay, that it was such weaknesses that made love impossible. Well, at least, this kind of love because true love can't be reconciled with its own antithesis. I had never thought of myself as lacking honor but I thought of how Abe would say that a man that lacked self-control - and the all-important introspection that steels it - would always end in dishonor.

When Sam had kissed me I had thought of those visions of my mother and now, with her looking at me with that remorse and regret, I identified with my mother for the first time in my life. Yes, for the first time I saw what it was like to fail someone you loved.

She rowed me back to the house without ever saying a word.

CHAPTER 11

ABE HAD GONE to the gym to do another workout and was just coming back to the house when I staggered in, melancholy, defeated, and full of shame. He took one look and knew I was hurting, so he delayed his shower and came into my room, sat on the little bed across from mine, his back against the wall, him facing the door and me facing him. I told him all about what happened and he listened without comment or question, which was something he was tremendously good at - probably as good as his boxing, I think. After I'd gone through the whole story and he'd taken it all in, he lowered his head and sighed as though he was greatly fatigued and I figured it was late and he'd worked out twice and was tired. But he kept his head bowed like that, chin against his chest, hands clasped in his lap, legs outstretched and hanging off the side of the bed, and didn't move. An occasional tapping of his thumb let me know he was still awake.

"I didn't know that you still had thoughts about Mom like that, Charlie," he said at last, raising his head but not really looking at me, staring up the wall at nothing in particular.

"Every now and then...whenever I'm in one of those moods, I guess, and when there's a door," I said with a forced chuckle.

He sighed again and stood up. He was standing there between the beds, looking down at me and I saw a storm turning in his eyes, a pain I couldn't describe and that made no sense. He seemed hurt.

"You didn't do anything wrong, Charlie," he said. His face was tense, more tense than when he was fighting. "You know that, right?"

"Not really," I said weakly.

"And you didn't let anyone down. You didn't cheat on anyone. Samantha will understand that. You shouldn't have to carry that burden, dude."

"And what if she doesn't?"

He bent down slightly and leaned his head forward, his dark, dark eyes glaring at me with a fighter's intensity. He said, "Then she's not who you think she is."

"Really?"

"Really." He patted my foot. "Get some sleep, little bro. You've been running ragged. And don't be so hard on yourself."

I did go to sleep and, like he suggested, I was quite a bit overtired. I slept right there above the covers, without changing my clothes, and slept close to twelve hours. I wasn't sure because I didn't look at the clock before I fell asleep. It was nearly noon when I awoke.

During my slumber, apparently, there had been some great activity. I learned later that Abe had caught up with Sam downstairs as she was making herself dinner. She told me that he came down the stairs, saw her there at the stove and stopped and stared at her from the doorway. When she asked what the matter was he replied, "I'm just not sure which it is."

"What is?"

"Whether you're that fragile or that selfish."

She hit him with the whole "you've no right to judge me" bit that's so popular when someone criticizes you these days even though that itself is a judgment of the other person's rights. Abe countered with something I hadn't thought of that night. He told her that if she was right and her mother was so manipulative and that she had a right to be wary of her and to put up barriers, then she also should have included me behind that barricade and not left me twisting in the wind - or on the deck, as it went.

That silenced her.

Abe's coup-de-grace was this: "And if you think about it, Samantha, he's no more spotted and stained by her and the world than you are and you can still go back to your oasis away from it all. You've forgiven yourself. Forgive him. If you can't learn how to do that when it matters - and when it's right - you'll grow very lonely in life. And if you can't see this then it's only because you've turned this whole place into the same things your father and mother have turned their things into - things to sacrifice people for. Charlie's mistake wasn't that he had no honor, but that he was unprepared to fight your battle. And in any war, in any

fight, when your ally takes a shot for you, he's your brother. You don't throw your wounded under the bus, Sam. You've got to deal with reality. What you're looking for isn't in that shack. It's in the pure heart."

Apparently she left without finishing her dinner. She left it cooking on the stove and walked back to the gazebo, got in the little white boat and rowed back to the shack.

When I heard about this I was stunned. Abe hadn't said anything like this to me when I told him of my failure and yet this is what he said to Sam. Truly, I hadn't seen this angle until he said it, but once I heard it I wasn't surprised. It was, after all, perfectly in tune with his whole worldview. He spoke often of the necessity of toughness, and of living with heart and courage. He always extolled the honor of champions and challengers alike who went forward even in the face of defeat. The thing was, I guess I hadn't connected those boxing stories to the rest of life as he had.

I remember him speaking of the second Leonard-Hearns fight in Vegas in '89. In their first fight, in 1981, Sugar Ray had come from behind to stop him. Hearns had been undefeated before that painful loss. Hearns had been *The Hitman* - a veritable destroyer with that fearsome right hand. Then he was fighting Ray and he was out-boxing the boxer. But Ray had turned stalker and puncher in the first fight - by necessity - and knocked Tommy out.

So, Tommy, harboring that nasty taste for revenge, knocked Ray silly in the 11th round of their return match. Tommy always possessed that wicked right hand. It was so

long, fast, and vicious that it seemed almost unfair. Well, he caught Ray with it, almost knocking his head into the hot desert night, and yet Ray didn't fall. So Tommy threw another, and then another. They crashed into the slick boxer's chin, usually unreachable because he was too fast, too smart, and then he wavered, rolling back and forth, tottering like a drunk, and finally he fell to the canvas on all fours. There he was, the great Sugar Ray Leonard, in the twilight of his career, battered to the canvas at the hands of one of the all-time greats. And it was over 100 degrees on that June night. It was late in the fight. Hearn's waited in the neutral corner, ready to finish off the man that had been the first to defeat him.

Ray sighed and picked up the count. Abe told me that he remembered thinking, "there's no reason for him to get up...he's hurt...Tommy's got more to give him and it's early in the round, so if he gets up he'll get battered badly and stopped." Yes, Abe said, the logical thing to do was to stay down. But Ray stood up. Abe always talked about the way he stood up with that look of resignation on his face as the ref wiped his gloves. He knew the pain and fury that were coming. He could have taken the easy way out but that's exactly what champions don't do - they chose to fight even when defeat is certain.

Tommy tore into him, battered the great Sugar Ray from corner to corner, unloading years of pent up fury in the guise of red leather missiles. But Ray endured long enough for Tommy to punch himself into fatigue and, indeed, the very moment Tommy's attack waned, the very moment it paused so that Tommy could catch his breath from his own

assault, Ray counter-attacked. By the final bell it was all Sugar Ray. He was the one doing the battering and the stalking and you wondered if, in fact, Tommy could make it to the end.

There they were - two greats fighting in the appalling heat, refusing to be beaten even when defeat seemed certain. Sure, Sugar Ray had speed, reflexes, power, and defense. But the greatest quality he had was that intangible, which all greats must have in order to be great - he had heart. It was that simple. The greats came back from defeat by the sheer power of their will and their hatred of defeat.

So I felt somewhat self-conscious when he told me this. I'd taken the whole thing very much like a chump when he put it in perspective for me. All of our dreaming and loving and music listening was fine but we really ought not to be so fragile. He actually said, "Charlie, you have to learn that there's a fight for the things you love in this world. There's a war. Everyone's a fighter in their own way. The ones who think they aren't are the ones who have quit and stayed on their stool. You can come back from this, man. You thought you were helping someone in need - and maybe you were. Who knows? The thing is, you can't be so soft, man. There's a price to pay for everything in life - especially for the things you want. You don't always think so, but there is and it's the highest price anyone can ever pay."

Also, when I got up I heard a bunch of commotion downstairs on the deck. I went to the balcony and looked

down but they were all over on the other side, in front of the kitchen, so I walked down the stairs, around the corner, and down the long, dim hallway to the main room. I saw them all outside and they were obviously arguing. Bernard was sitting in a chair, leaning back with his legs crossed at the ankles, arms folded. He was shaking his head in a bemused way. Abe was in the next seat, leaning forward with his right elbow on the table and his chin in his hand. He was looking sideways at Wayne and another man I had never seen before. They were seated across the table. I saw all this from the glass door while I fixed myself a bowl of cereal and ate it at the counter and watched them.

At the next table, Joel Arthur sat with Heather, who was wearing a similar outfit to the other day, yoga pants and a sleeveless blue shirt. Joel was sitting with his back to me so I couldn't see his expression, but Heather appeared surprised by what she was hearing. I, of course, could hear the voices but couldn't make out what they were saying and this was usually my issue. Most of the time so-called deaf people aren't completely deaf. Obviously, I can still hear sound. It's just that when it comes to voices, I can often times hear but not distinguish what's being said. It's akin to a hearing person listening to someone speak in a foreign language. It's all just noise. Well, this is even worse when there's a crowd of people because I never know who's talking and by the time I zero in, someone else has started.

This being the case, I sat there and enjoyed my bowl of sugar and milk and watched the body mechanics and expressions. I especially loved watching Bernard and Abe because they were both so animated. Most business people

I've seen are very straight-faced as I suppose they have to be in order to do their job. I mean, what type of business man is all excitable and demonstrative, except for a salesman? They pretty much need to be even tempered and not given to display. I get that. Even still, though, that makes them rather boring for a deaf guy to watch over his empty-calorie breakfast.

What I didn't notice was that there were more people present. When I stood up and brought my bowl to the sink I noticed the other table - on the other side of Abe's seat - and it had three more men I didn't recognize. Well, I cranked my hearing aid up to full power and stepped through the glass door, careful not to make noise, and sat at the nearest chair. Everyone in their turn looked over at me without expression except for Abe and Bernard who were both shaking their heads dismally at something just said.

It took a few minutes but I began to figure out what was going on - this despite not being able to understand much of what was said from the gentlemen I didn't know. You see, they were at the far table and often times I wasn't looking at them when they started talking so I missed the bulk of it. I do apologize for that. As much as I love to write, being a novelist is far easier for me than being a reporter because with the former I get to make everything up.

Anyway, from what I soon gathered, Wayne had brought these men to confront Bernard and they were all here only for a few hours until they left for some event down in Miami. The guy next to him, Daniel, was the owner or director or some kind of big-wig of the MMA organization that Joel fought with. The other guys were - and this was my

best guess - administrative officials and lawyers for the boxing and athletic commissions. So, as it went, Abe didn't have a boss in boxing. Boxers were free agents and free to sign for a fight with whomever they pleased. Of course, they had managers - promoters they were called for the most part - that negotiated on their behalf - and many boxers had long term contracts with these guys. It was like Fleetwood Mac or Journey having a contract with a record company. They had to produce music for them and give them a cut of the profits but what music they made was, for the most part, up to them. It was like this with boxers and promoters - unless you had Don King or someone like that and then they controlled everything you did. Abe was never like that. MMA guys, on the other hand, fought for the company and were basically told who they were going to fight. They had a boss in that there wasn't really another game in town.

The MMA business, therefore, has much more control over the fighter than boxing does, though boxing has a million and one ways to be corrupt and cheat the fighter. MMA, as far as I knew, was much more above board in how it cheated the fighter. It was basically like this: a promoter (boxing) or organization (MMA) makes money by having interesting fights that customers will pay for. Boxing, being a loose affiliation of disparate organizations, has sanctioning bodies that rank fighters and are paid fees out of fight purses. In MMA, the organization and the sanctioning body are the same thing. Furthermore, in boxing, if Abe personally negotiated (Pep did it when he was alive) for a match at a venue, the venue charged a fee and this was paid through ticket sales. But the greater the name

recognition of the fighter, the more often an arena or casino would pay for the right to host the fight because there was more profit that way. That's usually how Abe got paid after he became well known. This was especially true when dealing with casinos because they knew that a big fight would bring in the big-fish of gambling and so they might offer Abe a million bucks for a fight that they knew could bring them 50 times that in revenue. Because the promoters and fighters were independent of the organizations - fighters were ranked by them but otherwise free - boxers generally got better pay than MMA guys who were only paid by their organization. The organization, after all, didn't want to give up control of the fighters to casinos or other third parties, so they paid a site fee themselves and then paid their fighters. Abe once described it to me like this: an MMA fighter is working for a big corporation; a boxer is an independent contractor.

It was pretty clear to me in a hurry that all of these new faces were utterly against a cross-discipline match between Abe and Joel Arthur.

"We won't sanction it," a balding fellow at the far table said on several occasions.

"It's too dangerous...too dangerous..." another of them said, this guy a youngish lawyer looking fellow that had on a golf outfit - you know, with the funny shorts and the weird shoes that looked like the male version of saddle-shoes. "All the good will we've developed with the sanctioning bodies throughout the country would be gone in a minute if we let something like this happen."

“And imagine if one of the fighters is hurt,” Wayne added excitedly - as if he really cared. “Something like that would be horrific for everyone involved.”

“You mean for the fighter and their family or for the people who make money off the fights?” Bernard asked sarcastically.

“Give me a break,” the bald MMA big-wig said. He was wearing a collared short-sleeve shirt and looked to be in fairly good shape himself, like he could go a few rounds if he had to. “Don’t sit there and act like you care about the fighters. You just wanna put on a spectacle.”

“And you don’t?” Bernard shot back, looking, at least for the time being as though he’d regained his energy. “You own every cotton-picking piece of your fighters - their image, their fights, their advertising...everything. It’s all about you making money. I’m just giving them a chance to do what boxers have been doing for hundreds of years: make their own decisions and negotiate with the highest bidder instead of being stuck in a contract.”

The bald guy started cursing and laughing and saying, “you’re kidding me” in a myriad of foul ways. He sounded to me like he was a minor Mob guy from Jersey.

“Oh, and Don King and Bob Arum were angels. Those guys locked guys up. To get a shot at a King fighter you had to sign with King. How’s that different than what I do?”

Abe said, “Are you that ignorant or do you really not know the difference between a manager and an organization?”

“Look-it, man...” the MMA guy said, his elbows on the table and gesturing with his hands passionately, “I dig you.

You're a great fighter. What you did with your old trainer was awesome. I mean that. Everyone here respects that." He looked around and everyone nodded in agreement - even Wayne and Joel Arthur. "But this isn't about that. It's about doing things the right way. If you guys wanna fight, there's a right way and a wrong way to do it. Keeping things private and counting on this guy," he motioned to Bernard with a contemptuous wave of his hand, "isn't in line with the type of legacy you left in boxing. You left a legacy of standing up for what you believe in - and you showed incredible loyalty. That's awesome. Truly, it is. But this...this would be a circus. It would tarnish everyone involved."

"And, besides," the lawyer looking guy started, "you've been out of the game for two years. And Joel Arthur isn't gonna just be punching at you."

"Right. Hell, kid," Wayne said, "I know you're a proud champion, but I don't see how you can even get in there with Arthur. He's got more weapons. These new guys can fight standing...they can kick, they can punch, and they can elbow and knee..."

"And that's just standing." Joel said, looking at the table. I found it strange that he'd say something like that with Abe sitting there.

Abe looked at him without expression but even like that, being Abe, it was a relatively cold look. I've always thought that if Abe doesn't have a smile on his lips when he's looking at you, it's rather intimidating. He could be thinking of puppies and flowers and it still looks menacing because, being Abe, he probably had a plan worked out that if he

were ever in a fight and needed a weapon and there was nothing available but flowers and puppies, he could still kill you with them. It's just the way he is. If anyone could kill a man with a dandelion and a puppy, Abe is the guy.

Joel looked up at him, saw the stare and shrugged. He wasn't intimidated at all.

"You're a great boxer," Joel said. "But they're right. This is a different animal. I spar all the time with boxers. You saw what Walker did to Drew."

I almost blurted out that Drew wasn't very mobile at middleweight and by the time he fought Walker he was nearly whale weight, but I stopped myself in order to see what Abe would say.

I think everyone else had the same idea because the whole gathering was quiet.

Abe studied him, his eyes fixed and his brow drawn low over the dark eyes. He seemed puzzled. Then he said, "You're trying to talk me out of the fight?"

Joel shrugged and he and Heather shared a smile. "I'm just telling ya what I think, man. Boxing ain't MMA."

"So, you took the fight because you think it's easy?" I couldn't stop myself from asking.

"See! See!" Wayne started yammering after I slipped. "They are gonna fight. Ha!"

Crap. I should've kept my mouth shut. As it was, though, only Wayne was concerned with my admission. Everyone else was focused on Joel and Abe.

"I didn't say that," Joel said.

"Then what?" Abe pressed.

“Hey, I’ve got a lot of respect for you, dude. Don’t try and twist it that way. Don’t try and villain me. I’m just saying what I’m sure you already know. I respect you. You’re a great, great boxer. You’re awesome. But this is different. It’s a different discipline.”

“So’s this,” Abe said coldly.

Bernard laughed to himself and knew what was coming.

The rest of the group didn’t fail him - they erupted in noise and complaints and accusations.

“You see! See! Did you hear that! You’ve already got a fight planned,” Wayne was saying excitedly. I must admit that he had a fine way of whining and playing the victim while somehow maintaining his lawyer-type persona. It was impressive. Rare is the man that can combine whining with authority since the two are generally diametrically opposed to one another. He was so good at it - rather like watching one of the greats of old in the ring - that it was no wonder how he attained his success.

The MMA guy was ballistic now. He shot up and echoed Wayne’s point. “You guys already have something planned, don’t you? That’s it! You guys are already planning a fight. What kind of rules? Hmmm? What kind of rules? And where?”

The gentlemen at the other table were also lobbing questions and accusations too. The whole place was chaos and noise.

“You haven’t received sanction from any athletic commission,” the balding guy was saying. “And how could you? What rules are you proposing?”

This went on like that for a few minutes until finally Bernard had had enough. He too shot up from his seat and yelled at everyone in general, but at Wayne and the MMA mobster in particular. "That's enough from all of you," he was saying in a fury. "You guys...wow...you guys have forgotten a very vital piece of information in all of this."

Everyone stopped and looked at him.

"You're on my property!" Of course, I've also deleted a few choice expletives that Bernard used in conveying this simple fact. Not surprisingly, the angrier he was, the more he resembled the old Marine that he'd been. "I didn't invite any of you people. So you can all just go out the same way you came in. And now! If you don't like me - sue me! I don't need anyone's permission to have two of the world's greatest fighters hanging out with me on vacation. Since when is that a crime?"

"That's..." the MMA guy swore too. "You've got a fight set up. Don't pretend we're too stupid to figure that out. That's why you've got them here in the first place. You aren't doing barbecues and card games. You're planning on circumventing the athletic commissions and hosting your own fight somehow, somewhere."

"Son," Bernard said, "whether or not I think you're stupid is irrelevant. This is my property and I can do whatever I want with it. And Abe Johnson and Joel Arthur are free and grown men that can associate with whomever they please. And they can enter into contracts with whomever they please."

"They can't do what's unlawful."

“Well, that’s another issue altogether, isn’t it? But the pressing issue, the one you’re ignoring, is that you’re all on my private property and I don’t much care for your presence anymore.”

“Dad,” Wayne cut in, “you’re forgetting that I have a claim on this property.”

“Ah! Yes! You litigious pecker-head! It’s never okay for you to leave others alone. You can’t tolerate the fact that I don’t like you bureaucratic pinheads and I especially don’t like paying your damn tributes and fees either. But, whatever...the lawsuit changes nothing. I’m still the owner here. The judge hasn’t ruled on your ridiculous claim yet.”

“What claim?” Heather asked.

“My son here didn’t like the fact that this property - the house, the land, even the water around it - was owned by an LLC his mother and I had formed...”

“As a tax shelter.” Wayne added.

“Get off it. We paid property taxes, income taxes, sales taxes, breathing taxes, hospitality taxes, farting taxes...to hell with your taxes. It’s ours. We can do what we want with it.” Bernard railed. “And anyway, after she died, Wayne and his selfless, nun-like wife over there in the modest boat are pissed that the LLC manager is Amish Mike. They see that as an attempt to cut them out of their right to have something of mine that I don’t want to give them - which I don’t, so...” he stuck his tongue out at Wayne. Wayne threw his hands in the air, turned his back and paced irritably. “So the thankless and greedy pinhead sues me. Can you believe that?”

“Greedy? Me? You’ve lost your mind totally. Yep...totally lost your mind,” Wayne kept saying as he paced.

“So, you’re still on my property until a judge rules otherwise, junior. Until then, take your manipulative minions and go jump in the Gulf. Take em back to your boat and you can all share your mistress.”

Wayne swore at him in a barely contained fury. “You’re unbelievable,” he said under his breath, with unmatched bitterness. “Yeah, Dad...go ahead and tell them that. That’s fine. I’m sure you know all about me. And you’re so honest yourself but yet you won’t tell anyone what’s going on here.”

“I’ve been fully honest with Abe and Joel. And that’s our business.”

“Oh. I’m sure you have been.”

I turned and saw Sam coming up the walkway from the gazebo. My heart grew impossibly heavy in my chest as soon as my eyes set upon her and I made no attempt to hide my obsession - not that anyone was paying attention to me anyway. She stood out supremely from everything going on, all the cynicism and politics and duplicity. I was sorry to have to see her again in such an environment. Watching her come up the steps, her lovely and vivid brown eyes scanning the deck and taking in all the strange faces, I found myself wishing I’d been sitting alone at the gazebo when she came back. Yes...I wished for a return to our previous and precious magic - that magic that was all around us, was ubiquitous, and easy to take for granted. I wished fervently, painfully that last night hadn’t happened, regardless of how Abe saw the issue. When she looked at

me, there was such sadness in those eyes and I could tell she hadn't slept. Sorrow upon sorrow appeared to be weighing down upon her and she looked at me with a heavy expression as she wrapped her arms around Bernard from behind and planted a tender kiss upon his stubbly hair. I saw a faint smile dangling on her red lips despite her mood but it was listless. That brightness of spirit that was all around her, was her aura, if you subscribe to such things, which had vanished last night after I told her of her mother's kiss, was still suppressed by a quiet but subsuming melancholy. Her grace and sunshine were hidden from me behind clouds and regret.

I smiled at her and nearly teared up. I know, I know...I've got to stop being such a wuss. Anyway, weakly, she smiled back.

Bernard introduced her to the gathering and she waved half-heartedly at the sordid assembly. I felt no closer to her than any of the others. Wayne paused in his comments for the moment and stood impatiently, waiting for the minimum of time to pass before he could politely continue. When he did, I could tell that it caught her attention. Not just that, what he said snapped me out of the sorrowful trance that I'd fallen into as well.

"I'm sure that you tell them whatever it is they need to hear for you to get what you want, which is what you've always done," he went on, speaking to Bernard as if he was chiding a witness on a stand in the courtroom. Then, abruptly, without warning, he turned to Joel and Heather. "Has he paid you already too?"

They gave back no words, just puzzled, blank expressions and meager shakes of their heads.

"No? No. Figured that might be the case. Well, he's paid Abe Johnson over there. He's paid him alright."

I looked at Abe, then at Bernard - they both looked clueless.

"Yep. Yep. He's already paid your opponent in secret - like he does everything, Joel. He doesn't do anything out in the open. Everything with him is smoke and mirrors, cloak and dagger business. He should've been a spy. If I could, I'd recommend him for the top job at NSA or the CIA. He's masterful."

"We haven't heard anything like that," Heather replied and she and Joel looked irritated and uncomfortable.

"What's this about?" Joel leaned forward in his seat and asked Bernard. "Is this true?"

Bernard shook his head and waved his hands in the air. "You got me," he said. "I've no idea what you're rambling on about, Wayne. You keep accusing me of having gone bonkers and yet you're the one hurling accusations - unfounded, bogus accusations!"

"Oh, are they? He's paid Abe Johnson already," he said to the assemblage. I had the impression of him standing before a jury and making his case. His skin was inflamed with passion as he spoke and it made him look as if he'd taken too much sun lately. "He's paid him. I'm sure of it."

"You're nuts." Bernard said.

"Have you?" Joel demanded.

Abe stood up. His face stern, as stern as yesterday when he confronted Wayne except a bit worse I think. His

eyebrows were pulled down and his eyes glared with barely contained fury.

"You're a scumbag of a little man, Wayne," Abe said in a tone I can only describe as a charged calmness. He didn't yell, didn't raise his voice and yet there was a terrible gravity to it. "I warned you yesterday about your big mouth. Maybe you've been in law so long that you don't think real people mean what they say. I do. I do."

My heart was pounding in my chest. Everyone from the far table was looking around, at each other, at Wayne, at Bernard, and at Daniel, and no one knew what to do.

"You better apologize and drop this whole thing or the unsanctioned fight everyone's gonna see is between me and you."

"Whoa, whoa..." the MMA guy started saying. He was on his feet and moved to position himself between Abe and Wayne and he had his hands up on either side, as though separating the men though Abe was still at the other end of the deck and hadn't begun to move forward. "Let's settle down...settle down...no need to start going like this. Let's just sit back down and talk."

"I don't need to apologize to anyone," Wayne fired back, fully facing Abe, though with Daniel, part of a table, Bernard and Sam all in the way. "I'm not the one that's doing things behind everyone's back."

Bernard was up too and he said, "What the hell are you talking about?" He looked at Joel, then back at Wayne. "He's full of crap. I haven't given Abe anything."

"Not that it's any of your business anyway," Abe said with menace. "This is a bunch of..." He started to move around

the table towards Wayne. Bernard held out a hand and then everyone was up - including Joel and Heather.

I slinked down the wall a little to stay out of the way.

Abe motioned with his eyes for Bernard to step out of the way but Bernard wouldn't move. Sam was behind him, worry for her grandfather etched all over her. She put a hand on his shoulder and was imploring him to sit back down, to rest and not excite himself.

"Well, that's absolutely right," Bernard agreed with Abe. "It is none of his business...but hang on...hang on...I know you're upset...and I don't blame ya...and I can't say that I wouldn't like to see the little jerk get his butt whipped..."

"I'm not lying. Abe's got a locked suitcase up in his room full of cash."

Abe's expression went blank and I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Joel Arthur was looking back and forth at Bernard and Abe and I could tell that he was starting to believe that he'd been hoodwinked. Whatever the case, Wayne's accusation stopped my brother in his tracks. He stood there motionless and then, after a second, he started shaking his head.

"It's up there in his room. He's got a whole bunch of luggage - all of em open and they've got clothes in em, but there's that one with the locks."

"You snuck into his room?" Bernard asked, his eyes wide, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Pam saw it and told me about it."

"Oh, that makes it better."

"I saw him come out of Abe's room yesterday," I said.

Abe's face tightened back into a fearsome scowl and, frankly, I began to worry for everyone's safety at that moment. He was as mad as I'd ever seen him.

"You're a coward and a liar," he sneered at Wayne.

"If I am, then prove it right now. Prove it to all these people. Open the suitcase and show us."

"It's none of your damn business."

"It is now. And you can stare at me all you want, boxer-man. But if you lay a hand on me I'll make sure that you spend the rest of your prime years in jail. So you better think twice. You better think twice. You wanna give us stories about your honor and your integrity and how devoted you were to your trainer. Well, that's all so sweet. But I'm not like my daughter, Abe. I don't live in la-la land. I deal with liars every day. And the more someone tells you how much you can trust them, the more full of crap they are. That's pretty much the rule. So, why don't you come clean and tell everyone what's going on. You've got a deal for cash already with my father. You can't fight anymore because you've burned all your bridges and this is your way out. That isn't stupid...it isn't a bad idea. I'm not saying it is. I'm just saying that you need to quit making it look like you're so noble and I'm so..."

"Vile?" Bernard said.

Sam looked at Abe and searched his hard expression and shook her head.

"I'm sorry this is happening," he said to her softly, his voice low.

"Open the suitcase," she said.

He stared at her and they stayed like that for a long moment - looking at each other like they were having some kind of deep conversation just with their eyes. I wasn't sure what to make of it.

He made a face, I saw his jaw clench and then he said to Wayne, "Go get it. Since you know where it is...go get it."

For a second, Wayne had the look of a little kid that couldn't believe his luck, like he was told by his parents that he could eat cookies instead of dinner or he could open all his presents the day before Christmas. Then, gathering himself, he looked around and nodded at everyone, shrugged and shook his head, and went inside. Bernard and Joel were looking at each other, the latter with an irritated look. Bernard stood there and put his hands in his pockets. Sam turned back to check on him. She told him to sit back down, conserve his energy. I thought he looked a little feeble then, perhaps a bit broken but maybe it was simply fatigue. He sat back down and Sam pulled up Abe's chair and sat in it and had her hand on Bernard's arm, caressing it.

Abe looked at her again, then ran his hand across his head a few times and sighed.

Wayne came back down with the black suitcase, opened the door and stepped back onto the deck. He put it on the table he'd been sitting at and Abe, still standing on the other side of the table, looked down at it, and then back up at Wayne. He sighed again. His jaw muscles tightened. He was wearing dark athletic shorts and a baggy t-shirt that covered his upper arms and made him look very thin because you couldn't see all the muscle of his chest,

shoulders and upper arms. He looked over at Bernard and Sam, then at me. Strangely, I thought, he didn't look mad anymore...just thoughtful.

"Your move," Wayne said.

"I'll open it with a condition."

Wayne chuckled. "And what's that?"

"That you walk with me down to the gazebo for a moment."

Wayne was bewildered. "Are you kidding? Are you insane? I'm not gonna go down there and get my butt whipped, son."

Abe shook his head and said, "Just to talk for a moment. I'll open the suitcase and what I want to say to you has nothing to do with what you've just accused me of. I just wanna get on with this and we don't need to be upsetting everyone anymore."

"Just open it."

"No."

Abe turned and walked down the steps towards the gazebo. Halfway down, he turned and said, "It'll just take a second. I swear that you're in no danger."

Wayne laughed and looked around at everyone again. The consensus expression seemed to be one of consent - even from Joel and Heather. Sam and Bernard looked surprised, just as I must have looked too, I suppose, because I had no earthly idea what Abe had to discuss with Wayne in private. Moreover, the situation was already quite extraordinary for me in that I wasn't used to seeing Abe give anything up to anyone - especially not his privacy. But he was rather furtive at times and never quite included me

in his business dealings - not that I was particularly interested in them in the first place. What was in the locked suitcase, sitting there in the morning sun on the uneven glass table, in plain sight of all, I had no idea. I have to admit to finding it strange for Abe to come all this way potentially for free. It was unlike him. And, after what's happened in the past, where men had lied to him but covered their tracks legally, it wouldn't surprise me if when Wayne opened it there would be stacks of cash in it.

Of course, that would make a liar out of Bernard although I don't know exactly what deal he'd made with Joel but, judging from Joel's response to this whole sordid brouhaha, I assumed that it was winner take all. But, whatever was going on behind the scenes, I couldn't help but notice I had a sick stomach. The entire business of lawyers and commissioners and contracts was making me ill. I hated that we just couldn't stand here and tell the truth. Bernard had sold me on the honor thing. He'd sold me on his simplicity and integrity and I'd found myself thinking that if business and politics were like that then I'd pay more attention to them. Boxing was simple: two men competed. Politics and commissions ruined boxing, though. Everyone outside of the ring was destroying the simplicity and honor of what took place within the ropes. This seemed to be the case all across America. A few weeks back, when we were in Atlanta, we stopped to see a baseball game. After the game there was a line for letting the kids go out and run the bases. Well, that's perfect and sweet and idyllic, isn't it? I mean, who can be so jaded as to find something ill about kids gleefully running the same base-paths as their

heroes? I saw one kid standing there with his father, his big eyes wide with simple euphoria and anticipation. He was wearing a Chipper Jones jersey and was looking out at third base where Chipper had just played. All is still well with our land, I thought. Seeing that was similar to listening to music with Sam out on the water; it was magic because there was magic in that boy's heart, just as there were dreams alive in our hearts as we listened to Steve or Stevie or Harriet. It was all freedom and love and there was no fear.

The perfection and sweetness of the moment was shattered, however, when I noticed a guy come up to the kid's father and hand him a clipboard and pen. It was a waiver.

So, there's the dad, standing there with all the joy in his heart that a man gets when his son is aloft in his dreams and he, the dad, has given him the moment, and is sharing it with him, and then there's this clipboard. The dad was looking at the field and looking at his son with an unspeakable joy. How much had he already paid for the tickets and the parking and the hotdogs? How many hours had he worked in an office somewhere to afford that precious moment in his life where father and son could be kids and dreamers together? And, yes, you could see it in him too - fathers dream as their kids dream.

Perhaps I saw all of this because it was so odd to me to see parents with their children. I'd never been to an event like that. I'd never seen parents buying their kids things and sitting there with them and taking photos of them and deriving such joy from childish glee. It was all so very surreal and bizarre.

Well, this father has his hand on his son's little shoulder and I was close enough to see his expression when he looked at the paper on the clipboard. I don't know who's to blame for it, but it's simply the way America is today; we can't have the sweet, gentle pleasures of dreams anymore without a law, a lawyer, a regulation, or some rule or another interfering. It's all gone. I saw this on that poor guy's face. In an instant his perfection had been lost and how great a calamity it is when an adult finds something still unspotted in the grown-up world, holds it, cherishes it, loves it for the moment he has it, only to have it crushed anyway. Why couldn't they have left him alone? Why have we done this to ourselves? We've become so safe, so averse to danger, that we've regulated the lives from our own souls.

This was all the same right here too. These men on the deck were all invested in their rules and regulations. I'm not blaming any of them for that because I haven't been far enough down the path to make sense of how it all happened this way. But, though I hated all the secrecy Bernard had imposed, I understood where he was coming from. Even still, I hoped for his sake, as well as for Sam's too, that he hadn't made a side deal with Abe. I was standing there, watching for them to head back up the walkway after they'd disappeared toward the water, out of sight and sound, and hoping fervently that Bernard and Abe hadn't been dishonest to Joel.

When they walked back up the last few steps, everyone staring at them in bewilderment and anticipation, they were casual. Abe looked at me but only in passing. His eyes

caught mine for just a moment and then raced off to Bernard's and they stared at each other. There was a question on Bernard's countenance, his gray eyebrows, overgrown and bushy, were pulled down toward his still intensely blue eyes; he implored Abe with his look and Abe stared back, said nothing, did nothing, tried nothing, just let the old man sit there and wonder. Sam was watching him too and to her Abe gave the slightest of smiles, one that vanished as soon as it formed, as though he knew it would do no good anyway, but he couldn't stop himself. So, his rage and fury having evidently left him, he leaned against the railing since there was no chair left for him. He crossed those powerful arms, the muscles in his forearms glistening in the sun.

Wayne moved right to the suitcase. He was obviously unharmed and, interestingly, quite happy. Whatever had been spoken of down at the water hadn't dampened his mood. He took the suitcase in his hands and looked at it, then at Abe. Abe walked over and took it, spun it toward himself, held it with one hand and with the other keyed in some numbers on the lock. If there was a click or something denoting that the case was now unlocked, I obviously didn't hear it. Either way, Abe spun the case back towards Wayne and then walked back to his spot and leaned against the porch again.

Wayne delayed for a moment as though he knew the gravity of what he was doing and of the effect the action was going to have but, in truth, there was no way for him to have known that, so I really can't say why he hesitated as

he did. Perhaps it was nothing more than theatrics from a man well versed in appearances. Who knows?

He worked the latches on both sides, throwing them back and they made a strong snapping sound. Next, he brought his hands to the sides and lifted the top and stood looking down at the contents. From where I was I couldn't see. Neither could Sam, Bernard, Joel or his wife. Wayne looked down into it and quite a weird expression took hold of him. He stood like that for a moment, not moving, and then he seemed to snap out of it and started moving things around. Nothing he touched could be seen by anyone else since the luggage was quite deep and the back of the open side was hindering our view. The men at the other table might have been able to peer in - I couldn't tell what they could see - but they gave no indication that they had any better view than we did.

"Well?" Heather insisted.

I noticed again that Abe was watching Sam. She was fixed on Wayne and whatever it was he was going to pull out. Everyone waited on him. No one dared move in order to look for themselves.

"He's got..." Wayne muttered, "...ammo...boxes of ammo..." he held up a box of three inch shotgun shells. "...like he's waiting for a war...the guy's a prepper or something."

I started to laugh. That made sense. He'd always have extra ammo with him. He'd always be ready for battle. That was Abe alright. But then...why was it locked?

"And this was on top..."

Wayne's hand brought up something that I saw and didn't see. I saw it come up over the top of the suitcase but at first it didn't actually register in my consciousness. There was no possible way for the thing Wayne held in his hand to be what it was. It wasn't possible. It wasn't. The whole event rendered me utterly stupefied. It couldn't be real. It couldn't be. Wayne lifted it up with such a strange expression as though it was merely an afterthought and couldn't have been the reason for the locked suitcase - that it was just haphazardly thrown in among the ammo, perhaps by accident. "Whatever this is." He added and held it in his hand.

I stared as if woken from a dream, and was trying to discern if what I saw was reverie or reality. But the thing I saw was so fantastical, so outlandish and crazy, as to be incomprehensible to me. It was so unthinkable that I was sure what I saw wasn't what everyone else saw.

But I heard Sam gasp. Yes, I heard her gasp and I saw her amazed expression and saw her eyes fill with a torrent of tears and then I knew it was real.

I looked and Abe was staring at the floor. I looked back at the object in Wayne's hand, then back to Abe. He looked at me and I started to understand what I was seeing. My eyes too began to be overrun with tears, my throat swelled, and I fought back against being overrun by my emotions, maybe collapsing in a sobbing heap. Abe walked over to me and I watched him, step by step, and I saw Wayne standing there, confounded and looking at it too, wondering what it meant. Sam was sobbing and saying, "It's so beautiful...so beautiful...oh, my..."

Wayne was holding in his dishonorable hand something that held no meaning to him whatsoever. It was of no worth in a world such as his and, therefore, he could make no sense of how important it was in mine.

Wayne was holding my old Custer doll.

It'd been so many years since I'd held it. It was etched in my mind, certainly, but now to see it - Its blond hair yellowed like he'd been a smoker, far more yellow than I remember, and chewed on and ragged - in all its cheap, aged, dilapidated glory, was like nothing I thought to ever experience. There it was. There it was. Abe had kept it all this time, through all these years. He'd kept it locked and hidden where nothing could get at it. I had no idea how he'd gotten it but he'd kept it. There it was; there it was.

"Brother," he said in a low, deep, emotional whisper, a strong hand on my shoulder, looking at me intensely, "I'm sorry I never told you. Please let me keep him in the suitcase for now. He's yours. He's always been yours. But please let me put him back in for now. We can talk later... alone. I know I have a lot to explain to you."

I was nodding at him but not seeing him - not really seeing anyone anymore, just standing there in a spell of confusion and disparate emotions. I wasn't able to say anything intelligible, for I'd start and nothing would come forth and by the time I cleared my throat, and swiped at my tears, the thought had vanished and a new one was forming. So, I nodded at him and he squeezed my shoulder tighter and I heard him say, "I'm sorry I never told you."

"There's no need to be sorry," I managed to say.

Then I heard Bernard's voice, solid and commanding, though he himself was obviously tired and he didn't bother to stand up but stayed in his chair. "Well, that's the deal. There's nothing there," he was saying to everyone, especially to Joel. Wayne put everything back although I saw him puzzling over the suitcase some more and running his hand around it, looking like he was inspecting it, trying to find hidden treasure, not realizing he'd already found what treasure it really held. Eventually he gave up on this and was nodding.

"Yep, that's it," he agreed. "There's nothing here. I guess I was wrong fellas. I guess we can go."

"Go? Are you serious?" The MMA chief said loudly.

"I'm satisfied that there's no fight. Bernard brought them down to discuss the possibility of one...but there's nothing here."

"We're just gonna go? You dragged us all here - told us that you were positive there was gonna be a fight and now you're changed your mind because Abe's suitcase has ammo and dolls instead of cash? Is this really happening?"

"Told ya!" Bernard added.

"Well, I guess I was wrong. I had it in my head that they were gonna do something fast and I got worried."

"What did you talk about with Abe just now?" The chief asked. He was pacing back in forth like he was a fighter waiting for the opening bell.

"Nothing. Just what I've told you."

"Bull. I don't know what's going on here but..." he turned to Joel, shaking his head. "Joel, I know that you like

challenges. That's what has made you such a great fighter. But this is fishy, man...real fishy..."

"I've got plenty of fishing gear if you'd like," Bernard said.

"Think about this, man," the chief went on talking to Joel, ignoring the mocking grin from Bernard. "You don't know these guys. I know that they've worked something out or else you wouldn't be here. But think about this. Think carefully."

"Like you did when you signed your first contract with him," Bernard said.

"You're a jerk, old man," the chief said.

"Careful there, tough guy. You start insulting the elderly and infirm and then, before you know it, you're slapping babies and pregnant women too."

The chief made a face and shook his head at him. Bernard laughed like he was a little off his rocker.

Then, back to Joel and Heather, he said, "And if you fight him you might never be able to get your license back to do MMA. Have you thought about that?"

"Is he serious?" Heather asked.

"Not unless he can personally make money off of you," Bernard said.

Finally, and I'd noticed for a while that Joel looked like he was getting close to having had enough, he erupted. "This is crap. I don't like it! I don't like it at all." He stormed over to the edge of the deck, near the stairs and swung around to face everyone. I've always thought that everyone can appear intimidating when they get angry, but someone like Joel, with massive his traps and that thick neck and

mountainous chest, cast an intimidating shadow over everyone not making a living in professional wrestling.

"I don't like keeping secrets," he complained. Heather ran up to him and tried to forestall what was coming but to no avail. He shrugged off her muted protestations, took her hand and kissed it strongly, looked into her lovely eyes, and repeated himself just to her. "I don't like secrets. That's not who I am. It's not who we are."

"Honey...but..."

"I don't care. Listen," he said to Bernard, "I know what you offered. I know our deal but this is too much. I didn't think it would mean that I'd have to lie to everyone. I can't do that."

"You aren't lying to anyone, son. You're just not telling them what they have no right to know. None of what we do is any of their freaking business."

Again, I cleaned up Bernard's language. He was pretty hot.

"Maybe. Maybe not. But I just can't do this. I'm out. I'm not gonna fight if it means having to lie to everyone."

The chief was standing there looking like a Pentecostal at a revival and was saying, "Oh, yeah!" and the like.

Curiously, Wayne looked upset - even a little ill and he had his hand on the table next to the suitcase, like he was steadying himself.

"Son," Bernard stood up again, but not easily. Sam had to take his arm and help him. "You've got your conscience all in a bind. That's what these guys do. They gripe on and on and make you feel guilty when they themselves are the ones that ought to be ashamed. Do you know what this guy

brought in for your last fight on the pay-per-view numbers? Any clue?"

"Fifteen mil," Heather said.

"And you made what, 750?"

Joel and Heather nodded.

"It's called overhead, ya idiot," the chief said.

"Don't call him that," Sam protested with an angry scowl.

"Yeah, well, overhead was your salary too, wasn't it? What'd you make there, big guy? What'd you make out of the fight?"

The chief turned and walked back to his seat and sat down.

"He made two-and-a-half," Bernard went on. "That's quite a bit of overhead, he's right. And the guy you fought only made fifty thousand. That's nuts! And that's not even counting whatever money he brought in from advertising and other promotions."

"I had to pay the rest of the undercard too, Joel," the chief explained from his seat, though without the energy and verve of before.

"Yeah, right. I'm sure that they made more than you did, Joel," Bernard went on, walking right up to the MMA fighter and his wife. "So, you think about what you owe a man that sits back and rakes in millions - guaranteed! - for your fights. He makes over three times what you do and no one throws a single punch at him. That's a pretty good gig, wouldn't you say?"

"It still doesn't mean I should lie," Joel countered. He appeared as resolute on this point as Abe would on an issue

that pressed close to home, so I didn't expect him to budge. But Bernard didn't look to be arguing to change his - Joel's - mind but, instead, it appeared to be his own exercise of justification.

And I noticed as he spoke that his tanned skin was sagging more than it had just the day before. The deep lines in his face had grown more severe, more pronounced, and he looked ever more gaunt and gray. Even with this, though, his blue eyes blazed from within those deep sockets with a fire and energy that defied death - at least for now. It was strange to see him like this. There was Joel Arthur, tall, with the rock solid build, muscles thick and large, with that fair complexion untouched by age, stress, and defeat. He was the prime of life; Bernard was the end of days. To see them argue was to witness the temporal and the passing rage against what appeared to be eternal - and, yes, that's exactly what such youth and power look like in this world... eternal. To see Joel standing there in physical prime, standing on his principles, with his gorgeous wife beside him, the two of them without spot or blemish, was to think you were witnessing the pinnacle of life.

Bernard's case was hopeless and I felt sorry for him as he wasted his breath.

"It isn't lying when you tell people to stay the hell out of your affairs."

"I don't wanna live like that."

"Like what? Like a man who doesn't understand that these guys are gonna use your code against you? They don't tell you their whole business, son. You think they're telling you what you have a right to know and since you wouldn't

ever think to conceal pertinent business facts from them, you naturally assume they wouldn't withhold the same from you. But you're wrong, son. You're wrong."

"Whatever's on his conscience - on any of their hearts - that's their business," Joel remarked with calm conviction, yet with obvious heart. "But I can't live like that. Even if they are. I'm not stupid, man. I know how this works. But I'm not here to get everything I want - every cent. Other people can argue over that stuff. I don't care. I just wanna be real. And I wanna fight the best fighters in the world."

"I think we should get everything we can while we can," Heather remarked. "But that's Joel." She smiled but I'm not sure she was entirely joking.

Joel raised his voice to address everyone. "We're fighting - me and Abe Johnson over there. We're supposed to fight... right over there," he pointed to the side of the house, out in the open field that lay between the house and the outbuildings. It was flat and covered lightly by grass and some weeds.

That caused quite a commotion and everyone began speaking at once.

"It's a no-holds barred fight," Joel went on, talking over everyone. "And it's a winner take all pot."

Bernard was leaning against the table, looking more irritated than weak, though he certainly was tired. Sam's attention was fixed on him and she handed him a glass of water and made him take a sip.

Our uninvited guests were talking over each other and the situation was getting out of hand. Wayne wasn't saying anything, though. He had closed the suitcase - ammo and

Custer all returned safely, thank you - and had sat back down. He wore a curiously dismal expression and it looked to me as though he was upset over not having found the incriminating money in Abe's luggage.

"The pot is a billion dollars," Joel finished.

First there was a great and resounding silence - all these men of means and connections dumbstruck by the number, sitting there looking at each other much like I had been looking at Custer moments ago - and then they were nearly hysterical. "Are you kidding me?" And, "...a billion?" They kept asking the same questions in stunned incredulity. The sheer size of the number reduced them and there was nothing else they could think of or say. It was an unfathomable number to them.

Bernard confirmed it for them. "Yep. That was the deal."

"Who the hell pays one billion bucks for a fight? You haven't done any advertising. You can't get it sanctioned even if you advertised. How in the world are you planning on making your money back?" This was asked by the MMA chief.

"I'm not."

"My father," Wayne started, "isn't worried about making his money back because he has no intention of anyone ever knowing about the fight, gentleman. This is exactly what I was saying," he said with a look that wasn't nearly as satisfied as I would have expected considering the circumstances. "And he isn't planning on making any money because he's dying and he wants to spend it all. Right? Right?" He motioned to Bernard who, for his own part, sat

in an irritable silence. "He's just doing this to find a way to piss me off and screw me out of an inheritance."

"Well, whatever it's about...I guess...the fight's off," Joel said apologetically, turning to Heather and shrugging. "I'm sorry," he said, his hand reaching out and touching her arm almost like a man reaching ahead in the dark. "I couldn't go on like this."

"You swore them to secrecy, huh?" Wayne said. "That's so manipulative and paranoid of you, Dad. How very."

"Just shut up about it already," Bernard said with a growl. "You'll probably wanna sue me for that too."

The MMA chief came over and knelt down in front of Bernard's chair. He looked at him straight and spoke with a careful, nearly compassionate tone like the one a father uses when he chastises a son.

"You realize that this could have ruined their careers," he said. "Did you think about that? What if Joel lost and got hurt? He'd make no money and maybe not be able to fight again or if he could, he probably couldn't get a license."

Before Bernard could answer Joel spoke up. "That's the case with every fight - every time I walk into a cage, isn't it, Daniel? Every fighter faces that. We all take that risk."

"I didn't ask you."

Joel stormed over to him. Daniel stood up and they were nearly nose-to-nose standing there. "I'm not afraid, Daniel. The man made me an offer to fight in a historic fight. And he offered me a chance to make more money than any fighter has ever made. Think about that, Daniel. Think about what you did when you took a chance on the MMA business in the first place. Bernard's right. Success doesn't

come to people who are trying to be secure; it comes to people who identify what they want, prepare for it, practice and sacrifice for it, and then go out and take their chances. That's what it's about...that's what this is about. I can beat any man on the planet. I can beat this man. I would beat him. And if I can get paid more money than anyone has ever made fighting before - wow! How cool is that? Tell me that's not worth the risk."

"Amen and amen!" Bernard said excitedly.

"Now, Heather didn't want me to do this but she understands. She's married to a fighter. She knows that. I didn't mean this to disrespect you or anyone, Daniel. I love you, man. We've done great things in the cage. And all this about you making money, well, that's fine with me. I've made money too. I don't begrudge you one stinking dime. Good for you. This isn't about that. Maybe it is for them," he pointed his thumb at Bernard and Abe, "but for me it's about testing myself and taking challenges."

Joel hugged him vigorously and was patting him on the back saying, "I love you, dude...I meant no disrespect."

Daniel hugged him back, his bald head a little redder than it had been due to the raw emotions and the power of the fighter's embrace.

When they quit their embrace Daniel said, "I understand, man...I do. But to do it this way..."

"Like gladiators, man. Like gladiators."

Joel's face was full of a deep and resonating pride. He said that word, gladiators, and you could tell that it meant more to him than other words. As it rolled off his lips his shoulders pulled back and his chest edged forward and I

don't think that it happened consciously. No, he was in his mind that type of man. He was the ancient warrior and the modern athlete. He longed for battle the way Sam and I longed for peace and music and love. You could see this on his face, in his eyes, and in the way his muscles swelled and flexed at even the mention of the word - gladiator. For a man like Joel there was no pride in saying that he was an MMA fighter; that was only a modern construction, a modern permission to be as close to the warrior spirit as civilization allowed. He would never want to be an architect, a lawyer, a teacher. Nor was he a man that wanted to be a soldier either. His sole intent in life, as we could see right there in the way he spoke of it, was to be a warrior. He would walk out to battle the other army's Goliath. Joel was chiseled in the sweat, blood and fire that made champions and that was all he wanted to be - a champion alone in the arena, not one among many on a field. A hero standing over his vanquished, not a player with a defined role. A champion warrior wasn't like anything else and nothing else could be like a champion warrior. This was all Joel Arthur wanted to be. Whether he won or lost - it was irrelevant - so long as he fought with skill and with the honor that is a man's alone when he faces fear and defeat with courage.

I hadn't had the chance to notice this about him yet. But here it was. I hadn't known what to think of him until just this moment but now that I saw who he was - and I saw the unadulterated heart and the conviction of the man - I was a fan. Men of this type of conviction are rare in the world. Bernard was sitting there with his legs crossed, reclining

and oh so happy as he watched this. It was clear that this was the reason why he brought Joel to Florida. There was no mistaking the great respect the old man had for the young one and I must say that based upon this, it was well founded.

"You're a professional athlete," Daniel said somewhat weakly, knowing in his heart that he believed what Joel believed but hadn't followed that manly conviction all the way to the end of the line. This was the end of that line - standing there in front of him. A champion might be an athlete but is never only that alone.

"Runners are athletes. I'm a warrior. I fight. A man asked me to fight the one man in the world that might be able to defeat me and he offered me money to do it. I'd have done it for free."

"You just might."

"Fighters fight. You know that."

The MMA chief shook his head and stood there. He knew fighters enough - from the great to the mediocre to the no-hopers - and he knew that there was no way to change their minds. So, he stood there and looked at him and understood and kept shaking his head.

"I still want this fight to happen," Joel said to Bernard and Abe. "I want to fight you, Abe Johnson, over there in the sandy grass, in the open field, just you and me for whatever terms Bernard will give us even though I broke my agreement. I apologize for that but I don't apologize for why I didn't keep my word. I shouldn't have agreed the way I did. I hadn't thought that that's what it was gonna take.

So I'm sorry. But I still wanna fight. I'd consider it an honor."

Bernard's eyes were moist, his face flushed and full of great passion. He pumped his fist and shot up out of his seat, much to the dismay and chagrin of Sam. He charged over to Joel and hugged him with a great energy.

"Joel Arthur...Joel Arthur...I'm honored to have you here. I'm honored to have you in my home. I'm honored to know a man like you. And that's what you are. You're a man in a world of boys. Where'd you come from? Isn't it great that America still produces men such as these?" He asked us all as he looked reverently at his fighter. "Where would we be without such examples as you? This is what it's about. This is why I brought you here, wanted you here. You're a great athlete, indeed. You're stunningly fast. Your strength and skill are second to none in the cage. You've knocked out the great strikers and submitted great ground men. But that's not the best of you. The best of you is the code that you live by - the code of a warrior. We're drowning in moral rot brought on by ease and safety these days and there you stand - and there you stand," he pointed back to Abe, who was standing near me still, nodding his head, apparently agreeing with and moved by what he was hearing.

"So, the fight's still on?" Joel asked.

"Absolutely, son."

CHAPTER 12

LATER THAT DAY a clear sky prevailed above us. All was blue except where there were still thin clouds stretched across the horizon, like long trails of smoke rising from the endless water. Sam and I sat together on the beach, our bare toes mingling mindlessly in the soft sand as we sat in the partial shade of the palm tree behind us, itself next to one of the park's picnic tables. The water was calm, gently lapping against the clean beach almost as though it were a lake and there were speed boats going by causing small waves to roll ashore. There were no surfers or swimmers. The beach was ours alone.

Behind us we could hear a car engine now and then but for the most part the downtown was quiet too, so we sat in isolation while in plain view. I wondered how many other places in Florida offered this type of seclusion.

Sam was still wearing what she'd come to the house in earlier, a black dress that had sleeves that came halfway down her upper arm and the same distance down those long, lovely legs. She sat with those legs hugged to her chest, her toes curling and uncurling in the sand, making

little raking marks. Every now and then she rested her chin on her knees. It was like this that I told her about Abe's career.

She sat and listened to the story and didn't ask questions, just sat and nodded and looked off to vast water stretching out before us. We'd been talking there like that for some time when Abe himself came running down the beach. As it was, the beach on the Key didn't run in a straight line to Bernard's house, so you had to follow the road off his property, then zig-zag through a sleepy neighborhood, shaded by sprawling oak trees that cooled the streets and relaxed the town, and then loop over on the back side of the downtown to pick up the sand and water. I didn't know how far it was but my guess was that it was probably three or four miles of running if Abe had started from the house.

He came up the beach, shirtless, in black Nike shorts and red and black Nike sneakers. I asked him once why he liked Nike and he shrugged and said that he liked the swoosh - it was speed, he said. And speed kills.

Walking across the short beach to us, he began to pick his feet up more as the sand grew deeper. Sam was looking at him, eyes wide, evidently captivated by that lean and powerful physique that spoke of action from every angle, and with every loose, easy step. Not only did he have the coveted six-pack, he had a deep line on either side of his abs - chiseled obliques running down toward his hips, disappearing into the black shorts. His chest was flatter than Joel's, not as bulky, but still supremely muscled. Abe's arms were long and loose, dangling easily by his side as he

walked, and they were beautifully adorned by those deep strands in his deltoids, which met the horseshoe tricep in the back of his arm. The shoulders and upper back were wide, ripped and set atop those abs and the thin waist. When he put his hands on his head to wipe sweat away, he appeared like a cobra.

"We were talking about you," I said.

"Oh," he took a seat on the other side of Sam. "Counting the ways that you hate me?"

"Hate you?" Sam said. "No...no," she shook her head strongly. "I never hated you. I suppose that there are things in the world I don't understand."

Abe drew a long, deep breath and looked down at the sand. Clear, small, droplets of sweat were all over him. "That's why God gave us questions," he said with a smile.

"Why do you box?"

"I wish I could say that I love the battle just for the sake of it - like Joel, but that's not it. I don't think he's totally honest about that, though. Not that I think he's lying...just that he doesn't know it himself. A man that fights is either ego-centric, crazy, or angry and, maybe...probably...a mix of all three."

"Which one are you?"

"Angry. I've always been angry." He wiped his brow of the running perspiration and drew another long breath, still recovering from his run.

"That's what boxing gave you - a way to channel it?"

He looked at her, cold intensity in his eyes, "It gave me a chance to avenge myself, honey. That's not really noble. I know. But when you're a young man and you have so little

and what you have is always in jeopardy because of the weakness of others, you grow angry. I didn't want that for Charlie. I wanted Charlie to have peace. I wanted him to be able to grow up knowing he was safe because there was someone that loved him and that someone wouldn't let the evil things touch him. Does that make sense?"

He was answering Sam's question but he was talking to me too.

"I wasn't ready for a role like that. Who can be? Who can be thirteen, fourteen, sixteen years-old and have the maturity to pull that off? I was angry and yet I loved too. I understand if you guys don't get that. I understand if you think I'm just mean. I am, I suppose. I am those things. But what this world is sometimes...what it does to the weakest, the smallest, the children that most need security...I hate that. That's my anger. I boxed because it was the safe place for me to take my war. I didn't hate my opponents but neither did I pity them. A heavy bag, a pad, another man... they were all the outward symbols of the things I was trying to beat back."

"Like what?" Sam asked.

"Like Mom, for instance. She drank. And those guys that used her. They drank and they did drugs and they followed their urges. They weren't men; they were dogs. No...that's not fair. Dogs are loyal. They were wild dogs. They just followed their penises and their appetites. They thought they were tough because they could take what they wanted. Like Charlie's Custer. They were just big adolescents. That's all they were. They had no discipline. That's what I hated. And, you know what? They'll tell you that in this world today

you don't need self-discipline and if you're tolerant and you love then you're alright. But that's crap. Crap."

His face was a mask of intensity and tempered rage. His eyes glaring out under the sweaty brow, and you could tell he didn't see the same things Sam and I saw. We saw the peaceful beach, all quiet and tranquil and safe; Abe saw pending storms and danger all around.

"I couldn't get my head around it at the time. I was so young. But I saw the stupidity in that line of thought. You tell people that they can follow their heart, but neglect to give them self-control and they become indulgent, they become a slave. And, yeah, I said it: a slave. Mom was a slave. She wouldn't hurt us but those men did and those men and those circumstances were brought to our doorstep because of her slavery. She brought that upon us even though she loved us so I'm telling you that when this world tells you that you can love without self-control - that you can love and embrace vice at the same time - they're lying. You can't love, not truly, not in the way that's real, if you're given over to your vices.

"That's what I've hated. That's what my discipline is for."

He stood up and began to shadow box in the deep sand and, even with the slow footing, he pivoted and stepped with stunning celerity. His hands darted out with the swiftness and suddenness of arrows, not telegraphed, like shots of lightening from a darkened sky, appearing from nowhere and gone in an instant. We watched him in awe. Those muscles, the long strands in the upper chest and shoulders, flashed in glorious fury as he moved. Then, suddenly, he stopped and looked at us.

“That’s the virtue,” he said. “When I started, I couldn’t do this. I wasn’t this man when I started. It was hard and it was awkward. I’d drop my hands, I’d cross my feet, I’d get off balance, I’d be too predictable, push my punches. I’d do all the things that novices do. And that’s the difference between virtue and vice. Those guys that used Mom...they loved their porn and they loved sex. She was a beautiful lady. I know that makes you uncomfortable, Charlie and, trust me, it’s hard to say, but it’s the truth. She had the drink and it gave her something without demanding anything and then it took everything. That’s what vice does. It front loads its rewards. Virtues are the opposite. They’re hard at first, giving you nothing but frustration and pain and then, after years of practice, they give you all. That’s what you just saw. You saw skill born from years of effort, from dedication. What we love makes us into it. I’ve loved discipline, not boxing per se. Does that make sense? I wanted freedom from fear, not battle; I hated those things that would take peace and security from me and you, Charlie, so I fought them. And I told myself that no one would ever need to fear me unless they wanted to take from me what they had no right to. If they did that, I’d turn myself into the most fearsome weapon I could be. That’s what I wanted to be. That’s all I ever wanted to be - that weapon that would defend what was mine.”

“That’s why Custer is in your suitcase.”

He nodded solemnly, the sun at his back, casting a shadow over us. As usual, I was sitting in his shade.

“Yes, Charlie. That’s why Custer is there - more for me than for you.”

“How did you get him back?”

“Do you remember the night, Charlie?” He sat down in front of us, crossing his legs like I used to sit on the couch as a child - Indian style. “Our dinner got cold. Do you remember that? I remember the cold spaghetti and I ate it because I was so hungry. You’d gone back to the couch to play and watch TV. That’s the great thing about being a kid. You could always forget things for a little while.

“Well, while you did that, I stood in the kitchen and thought about it. I was doing dishes, leaning against the counter...and your words kept ringing in my ears. Do you remember what you said? Do you?”

“What?”

“You said you were sorry that you didn’t fight.”

He began to choke up. He clenched his fists and those jaw muscles flexed over against the thin cheeks with dark stubble.

“I remember.”

“To hear that in such innocence...and you were so sincere, man. You were so sweet. You had these big, big eyes - I still see them when I look at you even though you’re nearly a grown man now. I still see the eyes with tears in them, looking up at me hopelessly and with so much love. You were all that was right in the world, Charlie, and what was taken from you was the smallest thing and yet the greatest because it should never have gotten to that point. Do you understand?”

We both shook our heads.

“These great evils happen all over the world every day, right? People are starving. People are being murdered.

How does a man live with it and understand it? How do we see a sunset and give thanks to God when so much is wrong? That was what bothered me for so long, Charlie. And then you said that on that night. There you were - a child - and your world had been stolen from you and yet you cared more for me than for you. You were the one that had lost. You were the victim and yet you were trying to protect me. That was love. That's when I saw it. Right then, man! You were the catalyst. Those other evils, they weren't greater than the one perpetrated on us because you can't have the great ones without the one that starts it all - and that's the hatred of the good for being good. And that's exactly what Troy hated about you. He hated that you were innocent and full of love for me and for Mom.

"So I made up my mind right there in the kitchen and walked over to Troy's place. You probably don't remember but he lived a few blocks over at his grandmother's."

"Huh? Are you serious? He was a grown man."

"He was a loser. Both his parents were in jail. He crashed at our house sometimes when he was with Mom but most of the time he lived at home with his granny. No kidding. So I go over there and walk up on the porch and knock on the door. He answers and he's wearing a pair of nasty shorts and nothing else, no socks, shoes or anything. He's shocked to see me and I think the look on my face must have scared him."

"What did you do to him?" Sam asked in a frightened whisper, gripped by a terror that made her shudder. Suddenly, it seemed cold even though we were sitting there in that August heat.

Abe paused and picked at the sand with his finger, then he chuckled oddly. "Listen...so he's standing there and he says something like, 'what the hell do you want?' and I told him that he has five seconds to go get me Custer or I'm gonna beat him to death."

"He gave you Custer?"

"No. Grandma did."

He paused to let the absurdity sink in.

"Grandma?"

"Yeah," he laughed. "We're arguing back and forth and he's backing up and then she walks in. She'd been sitting in the living room listening and gets up and walks right between us. Well, she starts yelling at him like he's your age, ya know...really letting him have it. 'You stole a doll from a child?' She's saying in utter disbelief and he's all afraid of her and apologizing and making excuses and she tells him that if he doesn't turn it over then she's gonna help me beat his butt. Seriously. This really happened. 'You some tough guy running round taking dolls from babies,' she said. So, on the one hand, I wanna kill him...that's why I went there. And, ya know, I might have just killed him cause I was so angry. To this very day, even sitting here talking to you guys about it, I wonder what length I would've gone to. I don't know. I honestly don't know. But she gets into the middle of it and starts in on him and he's acting like a little kid. She's short and grandmotherly and she's got these knitting things in her hand that's she's pointing at him as she's talking. So, on the one hand I wanna bash his brains in - and he deserves it - and on the other, I find the whole scene hilarious.

"It dawns on me later, after I was walking home, that the whole thing boils down to discipline. He respected his grandmother and she could tell him what to do. You could tell that he was upset, seriously upset that she had seen that side of him and saw the type of man he was. That hurt him and he was trying to apologize and make excuses so that she wouldn't think it was as bad as it was. You get it? He couldn't handle her condemnation. Isn't that fascinating? It's probably because she was the only person in his life that had paid her bills - the moral ones, I mean. She'd paid the price over the years - of loving him, providing for him, and disciplining him - and she hadn't failed him morally in all that time. That's when it started. That was the spark. It continued to dawn on me and make sense to me. That's the way things like that work out in life. I saw the situation and knew it made sense of something that was wrong but it would take me years to fully define it. But, even so, I lived in the light of that realization without letting go of the hope it filled me with. It took me years to understand it and what it is is that kids need two things: they need unconditional love and they need loving discipline. What kind of discipline could a parent give that's not there? And what kind of discipline can a parent give that's addicted to something? They can't. So the kids grow up feeling scared, even if they're loved and that fear turns to rage in the hearts of young men.

"Well, as it turned out, he'd thrown Custer in the trash bin outside on the street. She made him go get it and apologize. Then she starts apologizing to me and brings me into the living room and sits me down in front of the TV. ER,

this show about an emergency room, was on. She made Troy go down to the store and get something new for you while we sat and watched the show.”

“Troy bought me the cars?”

“Funny, eh? I didn’t have any money. Of course he bought em.”

Sam and I were laughing and we both had tears in our eyes.

“I have to admit,” I said, “that when I saw Wayne hold him up I figured you’d killed Troy.”

Abe sat and laughed and shook his head in wonderment. “Funny how it worked out. Maybe I’d have gone to jail that night. Imagine that. Lord knows where you would have ended up. And that happens all the time to angry kids in the places we come from. They get mad about something... someone crosses them...they shoot em...stab em...whatever. Happens all the time cause no one teaches us how to be men anymore. We’re trying to figure it out on our own.”

“What happened to Troy after that?” Sam asked.

“No idea,” Abe replied. “We moved to Albany. In a few days, Mom was dead and I’m taking the bus back and forth to Schenectady in order to keep boxing.”

“Why’d you move back to Schenectady later? I would have thought you wouldn’t want anything to do with the place.”

“It reminded me of defeat,” he said stoically. “When I was there before...I was a kid and things - these events - had been happening to me. I didn’t like that. I wanted to go back, I guess, because it was a way of taking control of the past. I didn’t want to think of it as having beaten me. Plus, I

have to admit, I got the house cheap. In that section of town they were practically giving em away," he laughed. "You don't know this..." he paused and laughed and lowered his voice even though we were alone, "...but I bought that house too. The one where that happened."

"The one we had with Mom?"

"No. The one where Troy lived with his grandmother. After I'd made some money I saw it come up for sale at an auction."

I started laughing. "You're kidding? You own Troy's old house?"

"Not technically."

"Huh?"

"Well," he said with a smile, "it's technically owned by a guy named Charlie Custer."

Sam and I started cracking up and then he did too. We laughed like that all together and it was like therapy.

"I guess I won that fight too..."

CHAPTER 13

WE TALKED until we all got hungry. Since Abe didn't have a shirt and needed to change, we piled into the boat and I rowed us back to the house. It was hard work at first - the vast, eternal tide resisting my meager efforts. The waves rolled under the boat, gently pushing us back toward the beach. But I'd gotten better at the craft, had learned to use my legs as well as my arms, and I enjoyed the feeling of power as I pulled the oars through the clear, calming water. I felt strong and that was good. I'd never felt strong before.

Sam sat between us and she alternated her gaze between Abe, the shack and the water. There was something more feminine about her when she looked at him, something that he brought out in her just by his presence. Her eyes would glance at him, he looked at her, and they'd stay like that for a moment - neither speaking though there seemed to be much to say. This wasn't the Abe I was used to and it wasn't the Samantha who was my friend. I watched in silence and rowed and no one said anything. For some reason it made me wonder about how fast things were moving in the world and how I wanted to

stay there where things were slow, the rhythms of the water dictated your day and changes moved like the tide, not in tumultuous, sudden waves. I guess I wanted the safety - even if that safety meant aloneness. We rowed most of the way like that until we passed the shack and then Abe said, "Weird to be in a row boat in the ocean."

"Well," Sam started, sadness on her voice, "shouldn't be much longer. Once Tuck dies...you heard him, my father will start all the nonsense like he did last time - when Nanny died - and he'll end up selling the whole place. Either way, no matter what happens, I don't think I'd like to be here after he's gone."

"Maybe you should ask Bernard to leave the property to you."

She made a little grimace with her lips and shook her head. "No. No. I don't wanna get into that."

"Why?"

"Cause I don't wanna fight."

"You don't think it's worth it?"

"Just drop it. I'm not like you, Abe. You said it yourself - you're angry. There's a price to pay to get into all that and I don't want to pay it. Okay? I'd rather be alone and without this place than to go through all that."

"Your father would sue you for it?"

"My mother definitely would."

"That sucks," he said.

"I hadn't spoken to her in two years before we got here."

"I'm really sorry about that," I said. It was about the tenth time I'd apologized to her now.

"You didn't know."

I noticed how quiet and contemplative Abe was, staring down at the blue water, eyes moving back and forth, not taking in what he was looking at but deep in some thought or another.

"I don't mean to be rude," she said in her sweet, melodic voice. "Maybe someday I'll get to a place where they don't bother me. Maybe not. But once Tuck is gone I really don't care where my parents go. They've been so awful to him all these years. They're suing him and saying things about him. I remember when I told him - Tuck - that I wanted to be a photographer. We were sitting on the gazebo on a Christmas Eve. I was a senior in high-school. He asked why I wanted to take pictures of people. Isn't that funny? I told him that I didn't wanna be a wedding photographer necessarily - I just wanted to capture the things in life that moved me...that touched me. He said that that might be a hard way to earn a living and I told him I didn't care. I've worked as a waitress and worked my way through school and took out loans. I never asked him for anything and he never offered. We're not like that. You never know that Tuck has money when you're with him.

"My mother, on the other hand, went ballistic when I told her. She wanted me to go to a real school - not an art institute. She railed against me and called me stupid, out-of-touch, dreamy, wasteful, etcetera. My father sat there and didn't come to my defense. I tried to tell them what I saw - how I saw the world and how the shack and the water and the oak trees in town were all a part of something that had become a part of me and how I wanted to continue in that

simplicity, that quiet. No. No. To Pamela I was stupid. I was turning my back on them and becoming worthless.

"Tuck listened to me for hours. He loved my photography and would sit and look at my pictures and we'd talk about them forever. I'd sit there with him on the couch up in his pod and we'd look at photos and talk into the night. And he loved the shack and helped me decorate it. And he was the one that rigged the converter so we had electricity without having to use a generator. He'd come out and listen to records with me. I loved being with him. We worked in the shop on his cars. Yeah...I did that too. I'd be a grease-monkey with him. Betcha you guys never saw that coming, eh?"

No, I couldn't see her with a wrench in her hand.

We were nearing the gazebo and dock.

"He's dying. When he first told me I really couldn't believe it even though it was the one thing that deep down, so deep, I dreaded," she said. "I can see it now. I saw it today. He finally looked old today. Well, that's not the sort of thing I want to be talking with him about right now. It's bad enough that we're going through all this with the fight. I don't want to spend the last time I have with him bickering with my parents. Besides, I've already decided that I'm not leaving. I'll stay with him. He hasn't said how long he has or anything else for that matter but I'm not leaving him."

"Then what?" Abe asked as we pulled up to the dock and I tied us to it.

"Then I go back to Asheville, I guess."

Abe went in and showered and changed. While we waited she told me more stories about Bernard. I didn't say

much because I was sad for her and still uneasy about last night. There's that point in any relationship where things can change suddenly and then it's hard to recover the ease and trust that made it possible in the first place. It wasn't that I didn't trust her; it was the worry that I'd been irredeemably diminished in her eyes and that, for the one lapse, she would never trust me as much again. That thought, a particularly wicked worry, floated in my mind like some of those birds that glided along the water - always there but never touching down.

Abe came back and we all went to town in his truck to get dinner. There was a Mexican place downtown on one of the little side roads - more of an alley than a road. It was dark inside but much larger than it looked from outside. We took a seat in a booth near the back. There were several large flat-screens scattered about at different angles so there was a view from every seat. Most of them had soccer or college football on except for one, which was up ahead of our table to the right. Sam scooted in first, me next, and Abe took a seat across from us. The news on the one TV caught his attention and he swung his legs outside the booth and watched with great interest. The volume was either so low that it was drowned out or else it was on mute, but the ticker was running on the bottom and there was closed captioning on.

Like I said, it was so dark that it was almost like the shack overnight, the battery lanterns off and only moonlight glowing in from outside. Sam and I were studying the menu carefully in the bad light and giggling about it.

"Now I'm deaf and blind," I joked and she cracked up.

“Does this mean we can’t trust the food?” She laughed. “The good news is, though, that if you can’t see it, every bite’s a surprise.”

So, we were laughing it up and being silly and then I noticed that Abe still hadn’t budged and was studying the TV. I looked up and watched it for a second. I can’t say that when I first saw what was happening that I understood it at all. They were saying that the Dow had lost around half its value in one day - today - and they kept showing scenes of Wall Street traders looking, well, frenetic, panicky and basically like Wall Street traders looked every day. I mean, it didn’t strike me as that big of a deal because I never much cared about Wall Street in the first place and seeing a bunch of traders looking stressed wasn’t an image I considered abnormal. It’s like seeing Sports Center and they’re showing a clip of a coach yelling at someone. That’s what coaches do. It looked perfectly normal to me. But, again, I don’t know much about either field so that doesn’t help much. Seeing a Wall Street banker lose his shirt impacts me as much as seeing an NFL behemoth blow a hammy. Dangers of the trade, methinks.

But Abe was really paying attention to it and he’s reading the captioning as the anchor is talking to one alleged specialist after another. When I looked up they were saying something about defaults in Europe and how that, along with economic sanctions that we’d placed on someone somewhere, which had then done something back to us (all economic jargon, sorry...I wasn’t really that interested) had caused a sell-off, which caused a panic and now bulls and bears were apparently fighting. Follow that? I didn’t.

Or, as one pundit put it - no one really knew exactly what was going on...only that the market was down, down, down and that the extent of it was historic. Of course, everything is historic these days - and everything is breaking news. We live in breathless times even though nothing ever seems to happen, so it's all drowned out in a news cycle tidal wave of trumped up hysteria.

But Abe went on watching it closely and had apparently forgotten that we were with him, that he was in a restaurant, or that his name was Abe. Okay, maybe he wasn't that engrossed but I called him several times when the waitress showed up to take his order and he never responded.

Sam wondered if we should order for him but I shot that idea down. No one does anything for Abe except Abe. We were already working on our nachos when he reentered reality. He turned around and saw us eating and noticed he had water in front of him, which he drank in what looked like one long sip of his straw. Then he took my glass, put his straw in it and drank mine too. Sam looked surprised but I explained that I never drank my water anyway and that this was our time honored custom when we went out to eat. I always drank Coke; Abe always drank his water, my water, and several refills.

"Did you order?"

"Yep. Already did. You got squat coming," I said.

"Good. I can't eat this anyway."

"What'd you come in for?" Sam asked as she dipped a nacho into the greenish bean dip - at least I thought it was

greenish. From what little I could see, it might have been bright pink.

"Do they have salads?"

"Do you want a salad?" I asked.

"Not sure. Did you check?"

"Yeah. They have a chicken thingy...you'd wanna get everything pretty much on the side."

When the waitress came back with water for both glasses Abe ordered a chicken salad with extra veggies and honey mustard on the side. He'd use the dressing to dip his chicken if it was dry.

Surprisingly, his salad was brought out only a minute or two after our entrees. I got the enchiladas and Sam got soft tacos. The plates were enormous and we instantly regretted snacking so much on the nachos. Abe never touched them.

"Is the world falling apart?" I asked as I started on my food.

"The economy is."

"You look concerned."

"We should all be concerned."

Sam made a face and I laughed.

"Maybe some people will learn a valuable lesson," she said.

Abe sighed and ran his hand over his head, his dark eyes looking this way and that. "We all might, Sam."

"What do you care about the stock market for?" I asked.

"It's not just the stock market, Charlie. It's the whole thing...."

"Is it that bad?"

"Maybe. Maybe not..I dunno. There's no way to tell where it's headed. It's just that it looks like people haven't been paying their bills."

"Tuck said something to me about that last year when I was here."

"What'd he say?"

"He said that there were no adults in charge anymore and everyone was spending money that didn't exist."

"Ha," he laughed glumly. "He's probably a good guy to listen to on the subject."

"Well, when Tuck talks about money, that's what he talks about. He's the only one who ever talks about finance and stuff that doesn't bore the crap out of me."

"Figures," Abe's salad arrived. He broke open the wrapper that had his silverware and napkin and started eating.

"So, tell me, you're still gonna fight Joel Arthur?"

"I am."

"Did Tuck already pay you something?"

"I thought we already covered this."

"Maybe. All I know is that there wasn't money in your suitcase."

He looked depressed, or irritated. It was hard to tell which one.

"So you don't believe me."

"I'm just asking. Why'd you go off with my father? Why the side-deals and secrecy?"

"I'm sorry that you don't trust me."

She laughed and looked to be choking on her food. "You're kidding me, right? Seriously? You expect to go off

and talk to my father like that and expect me to think you're Santa Claus? That's not normal, dude."

"None of this is normal."

"Yeah...I got that. But just tell me. I know you don't have to and I know that technically it's none of my business but it sort of is. Don't you think?"

"I can't say just yet."

"In her defense," I said, "it's quite irregular by any account but especially when you consider Wayne."

"You too, huh?"

I nodded and chewed my enchilada. He stopped eating, put his fork down and sighed.

"What deal did you cut with my father?"

"We agreed not to say anything until after the fight," Abe replied.

Angrily, she said, "You might want to consider how thin the line is between you being protective and you being manipulative, Abe Johnson. I think you might have gotten the two confused."

"You think I'm manipulating you?"

"You're not telling me the truth. Now, I know that business stuff like that always has side-deals and shenanigans...I'm not naive. I get it. Everyone's out for themselves."

"And you might want to consider how thin the line is between bitterness and realism," he said.

She looked at him in that way she had where she looks almost sideways and her eyes glance over toward you, gracing you with their soft, lush, brown gaze. And she had a smile dancing on her lips too. It always seemed as though

she was about to smile, though she rarely smiled fully; such was her charm. There was a naturalness and a femininity to everything she did that she couldn't help. She'd look at you and you'd be exhilarated in a way that nothing else could match or promise. I watched her looking at him and became aware of how deep my adoration was for her. My worries and distractions flew at the sight of her eyes and all was jubilation and desire and the want of her happiness - the want of her. And I became jealous of any moment in time that those eyes rested on someone else other than me.

She looked at him playfully and had that hint of a smile on her red lips and it was all so innocently sexy that it made me ache. She shook her head and put her fork down, her thin, smooth fingers lingering on it before finally letting go and she looked at him that way, so deeply, thoughtfully. Abe returned this look with his predictable intensity - calm, stern, and aloof. If she was flirting with him, if that was her intent, perhaps because she thought it was funny or something, then she would have had better luck with a heavy bag. Abe simply waited for her answer and showed less emotion than my nearly half finished enchilada.

"You think I'm an idiot, don't you?" She said in her song-like voice, soft and sweet and melodic, a voice from which one could never imagine hearing anger or malice.

Abe didn't answer but I noticed his slight change of expression meant that she'd surprised him with her question.

"You think because you're a fighter and I'm an artist that I'm so weak and fragile."

He shrugged and sat back in the booth and watched her with what looked like skepticism, but I really couldn't tell. It was weird.

"That's what you think, isn't it?"

He shook his head but didn't respond.

"Well," she smiled in that way that made my heart ache with a monstrous fervency, "you might never know how much strength it takes to be me if you're not careful. And, besides, what's the warrior have in the world but the ugliness of his victories if I don't exist? What do you have afterwards to revel in, Abe Johnson, if people like me don't protect what's beautiful by living as artists? Hmmm? Maybe you should think about the balance of things and wonder for a while about how much strength it takes to be me."

"What strength are we talking about?"

"The strength that's vulnerable."

His look of introspection intensified and he was silent.

"Would you be so diligent if you knew you'd be defeated in all that you swear to defend? Or would you give in to despair? What would you do, Abe, if you were weak instead of strong? What would you do if the men like Troy were stronger than you? How would that impact your clarity and all your confidence? So you sit there and judge me to be as fragile as sand on the beach in a heavy tide, or as wobbly as my shack - ready to collapse at the first storm but you miss the obvious."

"What's that?"

"That to be that vulnerable takes courage. You're a man alright. And you have a lot in common with my grandfather, but you have a lot in common with my Dad too."

Abe's face twitched involuntarily and I actually think he looked hurt.

"So, you put Custer in a safe place. You locked it up, Abe. You imprisoned it - and you imprisoned yourself too. You're a warrior alright but you live in fear, not love. You're obsessed with winning. That's what your side-deals are about, I think. You say it's about love and protection, but it's about you winning - not matter how you dress it up. That's all."

"Why do you always have to attack me?" He said this softly, almost tenderly and his eyes searched hers, which impacted her and she paused to pick at her plate. "And why do you keep justifying yourself to me? Is it because you think..."

"What?"

"Nothing," he shook his head.

"Just say it."

"Never mind. Just tell me why."

She drew a long breath and looked at him. It was like I wasn't even at the table anymore.

"After you tell me what deal you have with my father."

"I can't."

"Then we have nothing to talk about."

He nodded solemnly, looking at us with a great and heavy sadness that I'd never seen in him before. He got up, went to the front, paid the bill and left us to walk back.

CHAPTER 14

THERE'S ALWAYS a sense of tremendous anticipation before every fight - even more, exponentially more, before a big fight. This one, being singular in its many ways, appeared to have impacted the very air of Florida. When I walked out onto the deck to survey the new morning, the air was heavy with a nearly obscene humidity. My Asheville Tourists t-shirt (a minor league baseball team on the outskirts of downtown Asheville) began to stick to me at once. I felt it grip and hug me in the humid air. Above the water past the property, several puffy white clouds rode along a pale sky, sailing out into the Gulf. I stood there in the hot, heavy air and thought of how hard it would be to fight on a day like this.

I had hardly seen anyone for the past few days. Wayne and Pamela had sailed back toward Tampa in quite a huff, hardly speaking to each other when I last saw them. Wayne, though, perhaps because of issues with his wife, had suddenly lost interest in the fight. Sure, Bernard, Abe, and Joel hadn't told anyone exactly when it was but I nevertheless found it strange that Wayne gave up all attempts to meddle.

As for my brother, after he had walked out of dinner I scarcely saw him for the next few days though I'd now and then catch glimpses of him running or shadow boxing. It seemed that he was shadow boxing in secrecy even in the open. He'd find a corner of the property, protected from prying eyes by the house, the bushes and a tree, and he'd be moving and punching and feinting. Knowing him as I do - and, therefore, knowing that there was no part of his training that was haphazard - it occurred to me that he was out there probably for two reasons.

The first was to acclimate to the outdoor fight, to get used to the heat and humidity. That seemed especially precocious today. The second reason was to get used to moving on the soft grass. I'd watch him move and slide one way, then another, and then stop to walk around, and then do it all over again and it was clear. And though Abe and Joel weren't going to be fighting in an arena, on sand, with the gnarly masses clamoring for blood, mayhem and murder, they were, nevertheless, going to be on terrain that may as well be sand. The Florida coast, unless acted upon by a professional grounds keeper, was generally not the same as a nice suburban lawn. It was all an extended beach, as though someone had tracked in sand and it hadn't been cleaned up.

Since our arrival Abe had trained in isolation. Neither party had been able to bring training partners, mitt holders, cut men, corner men of any sort, managers, personal trainers or anything at all. He and Joel took turns going into the gym to use the bags and do their workout but, to my knowledge, Abe was the only one to avail himself

of the opportunity to train on the actual surface they'd be fighting on. I'm not sure how it was with Joel, or of who was usually in charge of his training back home in Seattle, but I knew Abe was comfortable training by himself. Not having sparring partners or the like, though, was terribly odd and I stood there on the deck and wondered.

Abe hadn't boxed anyone for nearly three years and, naturally, I'd grown up a bit in that time. When he was boxing I had always been supremely confident in him, never seriously considered that he might lose, and basically thought of him as virtually unbeatable. But this time, not only was I older, but the circumstances of the fight were gravely altered to the point that by the time the morning of the fight arrived, I was extremely anxious.

In the days before one of his fights he'd usually disappear, so his absence for the last two didn't cause me alarm. It was strange, however, that he'd taken off the way he had that night at dinner and I wondered if that wasn't the cause of my uneasiness as I stood there sweating. I'd never seen him in a situation where he was compelled to leave like that and since I didn't have a chance to talk with him about it, I had no way of knowing his state of mind. But there was also the specter of the unknown in a fight where his opponent, likely for the first time in his career, had great advantages over him. Abe had never fought in anything resembling how he was going to fight Joel Arthur and, Joel, being an MMA fighter, was vastly more experienced in such a challenge. The rules of boxing are well known. There are rules in MMA but they are far less restrictive than in the ring and, for this reason, it was logical to wonder whether

or not Abe would be in for a rude surprise when Joel started kicking, elbowing and kneeing him - not to mention grappling.

Everything had been moving so fast and Sam had taken up so much of my attention that now that the fight was actually here I was, for lack of a better description, frightened. In the past, when Abe had scheduled a fight there were always a few months between the signing and the actual event. I had unwittingly fallen into that type of schedule in my own mind, and now here it was. The more I thought of it, the more panic seized me. In my mind I'd remember Joel's muscular physique and it dawned on me that his body was conditioned differently than Abe's for a reason. I had looked upon him initially with a little scorn and, I'm sad to admit, contempt. He struck me as a Pit-bull to Abe's wondrous and sleek Greyhound. The problem was that this wasn't a boxing match; it wasn't a race - it might very well be a demolition derby. That was my mistake. I saw Joel as a muscle-bound plodder against the world's greatest boxer and, yes, were they to box Joel could never, never touch him. But this wasn't going to be a boxing match at all.

Between the humidity and the panic, I found myself sweating profusely. I hurried back inside and over to Abe's room, knocked on his door and immediately tried the knob. It didn't turn. I knocked again and called to him and he opened the door.

He had his fight face on - terse, pitiless eyes fixed upon you like you were prey and had wandered into his domain. I rushed past him and closed the door.

In the past I'd never had the nerve to bother him before a fight.

"Are you okay?" I asked, sounding even to myself breathless and scared.

"What's wrong?"

"I just wanted to know if you were okay."

"Of course. Is there something I should know?"

"No...no...I just...just wanted to check on you."

He looked at me strangely and there was irritation in his expression.

"It's just that you're about to fight a guy with no rules and you've never done that before."

"Neither has he."

"What if he takes you down?"

"I'll have to get up, won't I?"

"But what if you can't? You've never dealt with this before."

He patted me on the shoulder and smiled. "Get out, Charlie." He opened the door and added, "I love you too."

"What if you get hurt?"

Amish Mike was standing in the hallway. He heard my question.

"Go, Charlie. Amish Mike can answer your questions later. No matter what happens. Go...go."

I looked at Amish Mike and he nodded at me slowly. I felt terrible that I'd crashed Abe's final preparations, disturbed him in the hour before the fight of his life, with things I should have asked already except that I was too preoccupied with my own life. And what life was that? I was here because of him, for crying out loud. Oh! I hated myself

as never before in my life. Certainly, I know well my limitations and handicaps but that never meant that I loathed myself. To loathe oneself is to get a glimpse of ugliness and ineptitude from within your own heart and that's exactly what occurred to me as I walked past Amish Mike. These two men were taking care of reality and I was lost in my own head. They had been living in the real world, doing what needed to be done, preparing for the world that existed, and I was in love and pouting about not being loved back. I walked past Amish Mike, he put a hand of sympathy on me as I passed, and for the first time in my life I felt ashamed of myself in the way that a man can when he realizes he's still an adolescent instead of a man. Just like that I saw how Sam not only couldn't love me, but shouldn't. And I saw in my mind that look she had as she watched Abe the other day, when she looked at him on the beach - and on the deck previous to that - and I knew that it was the look a woman gives a man that has a strength she admires. It was clear. They keep telling us the rules have changed in love, but I began to see that as another lie of the times. A woman wants to love a man, not a boy.

I walked down the hall back to my room with my head bowed in the shame and regret that accompany boys that don't grow up and I left the men to prepare.

A little while later, as I sat on my bed and gazed mindlessly out the window, Bernard popped his head in my open door. I'd left it open in the hope that Sam might stop by.

"Amish Mike said you might need some company before the fight starts," he said as he took a seat on the bed next to

the door. He looked well today. I looked at him, studying him for signs of the progress of his illness and, despite the obviousness of my scrutiny, he smiled easily and shook his head. "You're gonna be fine, son. We can go to the balcony of my room and watch from there if you want."

"I'm scared, sir."

"I know. And that's okay."

"But I should have been scared before."

"So? That's got nothing to do with it."

"What happens if he gets hurt?"

Bernard stood up and walked to the door. He was wearing a pair of slacks with a dark belt, green golf shirt, and dress shoes. He smoothed the front of his pants in the doorway and looked around the room before his bright blue eyes settled on me. I saw a warmth in his stare but, of course, there was hardness too. With him there was always both: the fist and the pat on the back.

"Ya want me to lie to you? I don't think you're that much of a wuss, son. I know you know what's at stake here. Your brother's a fighter. This is what fighters do."

"So you say."

"What's that mean?"

"That means that he's a boxer. You've made him into this...this bizarre gladiator thing you've got going on."

He leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms. Below the short sleeves you could still see the lean muscularity of his forearms as he crossed them, beneath strands of snow white hair and bronzed skin, worn and wrinkled by the sun and the years. "Everyone takes risks for what they do, Charlie. Look at you."

“Huh?”

“You took a risk with Sam, didn’t you? And that’s why you’ve been moping around here these last few days. But you risked.”

“What’s so noble about that?”

“It’s noble because it means you’re honest and not afraid. An honest man goes out there and says, ‘this is me... and that’s what I want...if I can get it.’ The dishonest man either never applies himself to what he wants - for fear of failure - or he demands that others guarantee his success. That’s this country today, son. It’s full of people that demand victory in whatever they do and the politicians that pander to them. That’s the root of all the trouble brewing, son. The minute a man starts to think that things ought to be guaranteed is the minute he dies. So, your brother might lose. Yes. He might get hurt. He might die. That’s the risk. He accepts it and he’s gonna walk out there in ten minutes and test himself according to his discipline - according to his training and his talent - and he’s gonna rely on no one else but himself. He might win; he might lose. Either way, it’s outstanding. If he’s not good enough or if Joel’s simply better, it doesn’t matter. The winner is never the man that doesn’t face his fears. And, here’s the thing: I betcha he’s got the same emotions that you have right now.”

I found that hard to believe.

“He’s got em. Joel Arthur’s got em. But they face em, son. So, you can say what you want about me and I accept that. I accept that in this world that I’m outlandish and this is barbaric. Sam already said as much. But to that loathing you might have for me, I say, ‘that nature doesn’t care

about your sensibility. Reality doesn't mind you, so you better mind it.' That's what I think about it, Charlie. That's what I've always thought about it."

There was no use in arguing with him. In fact, I wasn't comfortable with the conversation's direction to start with because it wasn't as if I was making a coherent argument. I was upset. I was scared. And I was lost in a moment of self-reproach and felt unalterably, inconsolably alone. I was hundreds of miles from home but may as well have been millions. Sam was talking to me, was friendly with me but she still hadn't brought me back to the shack since that night. So, I was sending forth protestations to Bernard because he was kind enough to see me.

I told him that I'd join him on his balcony in a few minutes and he left me to my miserable meditations. I would have went straight-away but pride makes a man do wondrously dense things and I thought that by remaining where I was, sitting on the edge of the bed, leaning forward miserably and staring at the same spot on the aging carpet, I was salvaging a measure of dignity. Pride has us dance a dance that always reveals to others the opposite of our intent. So it was with me too.

I walked out on the balcony, through the sliding door in his room next to the sofa, and turned around the corner, down the side and around another corner to face the big yard where they were going to fight. Bernard was sitting close to the corner. Sam and Heather were in chairs on the other side of him. I exchanged pleasantries with everyone and took the seat between Bernard and Sam. She told me that there was iced tea and soda in the fridge back in

Bernard's room but I shook my head. Her mood was downcast; Heather smiled a lot but wasn't saying much of anything.

Below us Amish Mike stood in the middle of the yard, which, if I had my guess was a good couple of thousand square feet. It's hard to say when you're looking at something open and there's nothing to compare it to, but they easily had more than twice as much room as a large boxing ring. I thought that was in Abe's favor.

The yard was open but offered its share of perils for the combatants. First, there were bushes on the far side of the property line, which would act basically as the ropes or cage of their arena. But the bushes ran in dense, prickly green clusters and behind them and in their few gaps was a slight grade that led to the water. There was no sand or beach. Past the bushes there was simply tall, unruly deep green grass - darker green than the shorter grass in the yard - and then water. This was the outer perimeter of the yard, extending in a semi-circle around the property.

Towards the left side of the area was one Palm tree among the wild bushes. The bottom was jagged and wild and made me think that it was an overgrown pineapple masquerading as a tree. Of course, on the near side of the fighting area were the house and out buildings. The footing, which would be of more critical importance to Abe than Joel since Abe would not want to be on the ground with the more experienced grappler, looked to be okay. Short grass with blotches of sandy brown dirt dotted the center area. It was mainly flat with no noticeable holes. I'm sure that both fighters had gone over that themselves.

If the fight pushed down towards the perimeter I could see it landing in the water. There was nothing but the nasty tree to stop the horrid momentum of two men waging battle. That struck me as a particularly fearsome challenge for Abe. He had plenty of room to navigate but should he run out of the abundant space, there were rather unappealing hazards awaiting him.

I must have looked worried because Sam patted my hand, which was resting on the arm of the plastic chair. The deck chairs all had plush cushions on them, which were white with three vertical orange stripes. Bernard probably bought them at Wal-Mart.

Sam, on the other hand, was certainly not common; she was as lovely as I was vexed. She was wearing a pretty little white dress, which looked like lace and was, to me, all innocence and seduction at once. Her thought was probably that it was comfortable considering that it was a gazillion degrees in the sun. Her black hair fell across the white shoulder straps, making both hair and dress more extreme in their allure and beauty. She was, as always, a presence of feminine perfection and my eyes were drawn to her despite the growing drama below us. Around her, I was like a leaf swaying in a pleasant wind, unable to resist being moved by her, and floating slowly, yet knowing that my end was always the ground. She smiled at me, her dark eyelashes drawing my attention as she sighed and closed her eyes. They were long and soft against her skin. The touch of her fingers sliding along my hand revived me and the sight of her distracted me enough from the fight that the feeling of sickness in the heat lifted.

Down below, Abe was to the left. Joel was across the yard on our right. Both men were shirtless. Abe looked much like he did when he went running. He wore running sneakers instead of boxing shoes - black Nike's with red - and had on black shorts tied tight at his slender waist. His shoulders gleamed with sweat as he pumped his arms intermittently at the air and paced to and fro. Joel wore wrestling sneakers - black Asics with curving white lines. I'm not sure if such footwear was well thought out on his part. There was no way to know yet. He wore baggy MMA fight shorts, which were blue, white and black. He'd worn the same pair for his last several fights, which I'd seen on the internet. The size discrepancy between the two was more apparent now that they were ready to square off. Joel's physique - he was like a rock with wrestling sneakers on - was broad and powerful; Abe was sleek and muscular.

I couldn't stop thinking of the difference between a race car and a truck.

Sam likely was thinking the same thing as they walked toward Amish Mike in the center of the yard because she squeezed my hand without taking her eyes from the action. Not having been privy to this form of entertainment in the past, she was clearly feeling the hard onset of nerves as the bout was nearing its genesis.

Amish Mike checked them over, inspecting their fists, arms and legs, then their trunks/shorts, making sure they had no weapons and weren't wearing any protective gear. They could wear mouthpieces but not groin protection, hand wraps or anything else. And, as I understood it, the

mouthpieces were allowed but not required. They both had one.

“Gentlemen,” Amish Mike said loud enough so that even I’d hear him up on the second story, “you know the rules. There are no rules. There are no rounds and no rests. The match goes until one of you - or both of you - cannot continue due to knockout, choke-out, or verbal or physical tap. If your opponent taps or surrenders, you are not under obligation to stop unless it’s corroborated by me. If a fighter refuses to fight or leaves the immediate yard area, he will be considered to have surrendered and therefore to have lost. Even still, his opponent may elect to pursue him. There are no forbidden tactics or targets except for the use of any weapon that is not your immediate body. We ask that you fight with honor, gentlemen. Are there any questions?”

He turned and looked first at Joel. Joel shook his head and stared straight at Abe.

Then Amish Mike turned and looked at Abe. “Any questions?” He repeated.

Abe shook his head too, calmly and with a certain nonchalance that looked completely out of place under the circumstances, but I’d seen him do it before - whatever storm of emotions he felt, whatever fear or anxiety, were quieted through the power of a will grown strong through years of discipline. His expression was like that of a man waiting for a bus, ordering a hamburger, or buying movie tickets; there seemed to be no recognition at all that he was about to face, perhaps, the greatest fighter on the planet in no-holds barred combat.

“Well then, gentlemen, you may proceed.”

Amish Mike walked off toward the house and disappeared under the deck. Through the gaps in the wood I could see him walk up the steps and take a seat.

It was on.

CHAPTER 15

THE WIND HAD STOPPED and all was supremely still as they circled each other. Sam was squeezing my hand and I was surprised by her strength. I glanced at Bernard and he was sitting with his forearms resting on the deck, chin atop crossed arms. Heather stood there in the corner, was leaning forward, her lovely countenance troubled and stormy in grave anticipation. So, there we were, spectators watching men of action, all apparently unable to quell the violence of emotions from within ourselves even though no one was throwing blows at us. We were all tight and pensive as we watched them circle. Joel extended a bare fist across the measure that separated them and Abe bumped it with his own naked knuckles.

I wondered what it was going to be like for someone to get hit by Abe's bare fist.

Abe was in that ever so slight crouch he fought out of, knees bent, hunched a little and he stalked and circled toward Joel's power side - his left. Joel was, in boxing's view, a southpaw though in MMA many former wrestlers led with their right because there wasn't the taboo against left-

handlers that there was in the ring culture. Boxing hated southpaws and many were turned around - that is, forced to fight orthodox - so it was hard to get experience against them. Thus, it was customary for a good defensive boxer to circle to his own right - and away from his foe's power - but this common practice was dangerous against the lefty, which is exactly what Abe was doing with Joel.

Thirty seconds or more passed like this, the men moving in short, measured steps, offering a fake here and there, or pawing out with a lead that had no hope to score. This was usual in fights between champions because they both knew that the other could hurt them and they were in no hurry to rush in stupidly. This is the general error of novice fighters: in their fear and lack of professionalism, they're greedy to land telling blows without setup and, therefore, without cover. They're like an army rushing forward into a certain defense, thereby exposing themselves to serious counter-fire. Real pros, in any combative endeavor, are never impatient - they take their time...in a hurry (as I've heard Abe say).

Suddenly, with his terrible swiftness of foot and fist, Abe darted forward with a one-two, both fists flashing out and snapping in the air, so fast that both punches were nearly as one. They went forth without telegraph and as Abe was circling to his right - his right foot stepping ahead of the left, the left scooting over to catch up, only this time, right when the left foot was going to slide to the right, he shot forward with the attack instead. I'd seen him do this before, knew of this blitzkrieg tactic of off-setting his opponent

through footwork in order to set him up for assault, or else I never would have recognized it.

When the attack came, Joel was tracking him, staying low, being careful. Right then I saw his plan, which was to have Abe come get him, not to lead so that he could avoid counters, and to use Abe's attack as an opportunity to gain a clinch or takedown. That was the plan. The reality was, however, that Abe was frighteningly fast on the draw. Joel saw the one-two launch a split second late and had to pull his head back to his rear (left) shoulder to avoid the fistic missiles. Still, though, he was quick too - far quicker than a man built like that has any business being. He pulled away and in one fantastically explosive motion, swung around to his left, and shot in low at Abe's exposed legs.

It was all in a violent and blazing flash of action. Abe attacked and Joel shot back, down, around and then in as Abe's attack was retracting. Abe anticipated the counter and was already moving away - back towards his left - as Joel came underneath. Despite this, Joel's right hand still caught the back of Abe's leg, which caused my brother to pull the leg back and use his right hand to push at Joel's head. There was a furious scramble, going right, then left, then right again. Abe never threw a punch in all of it; he moved and moved and stiff armed.

Finally, Joel gave up on the attack and stood up.

At some point in the process, and I don't specifically remember when, Sam and I had stood up. Then, as they resumed their stalking of one another, I felt my heart beating, no, pounding in my chest. The suddenness of it all struck me viciously. My mouth was dry and I was more

thirsty than I'd ever been in all my life - I was sure of that. But there was no chance of me going to get an iced tea from the fridge now. Crazily, not thinking, I grabbed Sam's from the table and drank it all in one continuous gulp. She didn't notice.

But there was more: for the first time in my life I felt an all-consuming love for Abe, one drenched with worry and trepidation. He wasn't just a brother - he was truly all of my heart, my soul, and my life. There had never been a thing I'd experienced in life without him. He was this colossus, this champion, this lord of the physical universe and I'd never once been made to feel inadequate by him. All at once, as his vulnerability dawned upon me, as the danger and peril he faced set in before my nearly crying eyes, I was moved with a terrible, dreadful trepidation. He'd always been my leader and yet my servant. He was a man of love; a man that had never let me down and had gone so far in his love as to give me the full ability of even being indifferent to him. Bullies don't do that. Only love serves and leads and yet I hadn't said a word after Sam had said what she said about him at dinner the other night. No. There I had sat at the very table with him, eating a meal he paid for, and I listened to someone insult him over being something that I was living proof he was not, and yet I said not a single word in his defense. Hot shame flooded me. I loved him. I loved him. And no one has ever stood up for him in his entire life - including me. For all his loyalty and service and love I had sat there and stuffed my face and wondered what it would be like to be the man that Sam loved.

Well, truly, Sam ought to love him.

And she probably did too. I saw that suddenly. It had been apparent since Wayne pulled Custer out of the case, but I was too self-absorbed to see it...rather, admit it.

Another quick skirmish ensued. Joel, with his back to us, launched a two-fisted attack, followed by a round house kick. The shin bone of Joel's kicking leg smashed into the side of Abe's front leg, which stopped him in his tracks. He'd defended the punches by keeping his hands high, palms forward, and circling away, but the kick - a switch kick from Joel's right - caught him clean. It wasn't as powerful as the rear left kick would have been but it was strong enough for me to hear. There was a loud smack when it landed. Abe didn't flinch. But there was more, right after the kick, Joel again shot down for the takedown and Abe had to sprawl and scramble. His sprawl was better than I think Joel or Heather expected. Abe pulled away again, Joel was down on all fours and swung back up with a frustrated look. Heather had the same look too. Abe's takedown defense was saving him.

This settled in as the theme of the fight: Abe circling, tossing jabs and one-two's that served more as fluttering defensive measures than actual attacks in that he never threw them with serious intent to score. A few managed to touch Joel's face but nothing more. Joel's attack, on the other hand, was more vigorous as well as being more diversified. He began to kick with more regularity, chopping at Abe's fast legs and following them up with furious punches and takedown attempts. Abe was never caught flush from any of these but several kicks scored solid enough that we all winced - except for Heather who began

to look more confident and pumped her fist in frustration at the near-misses in Joel's assaults.

Several minutes passed under the relentless sun, which beat down on them without pity. We were under the cover of the roof and there was more of a breeze on the balcony than down below. But, either way, we weren't fighting, and yet my hand, from Sam's continuous grip, waning and tightening in the drama, was sweating.

For his part, Abe looked limited and unable or unwilling to mount a sustained, effective attack. I couldn't tell which it was. He was keeping his distance and making sure he didn't do anything that would allow Joel to get a hold of him. That made sense, of course, but that was no way of winning a fight and I worried that this was all he could do - move and wait and hope that Joel tired of chasing him. Abe wasn't stepping in behind the jab, nor was he trying to counter either. Perhaps there were too many weapons in play for him and he was struggling to assimilate his tactics. I hoped that was case.

Another minute passed, then another. There were no breaks. Joel was beginning to pick up emotional steam, frustrated by Abe's refusal, reluctance or inability to engage him. At one point, the MMA champion stepped back and beckoned Abe forward by throwing his hands up in the air. He wasn't mocking him exactly - it was more an expression of frustration than disrespect. Abe remained steadfast and his expression was unchanged. Joel threw a head kick with his left and Abe barely pulled back in time to avoid it. He was careful not to block the high kicks with his hands for fear of taking a shin bone on the arm and maybe

breaking his arm. Then another high kick and a short right round kick to the leg as Abe moved away. Like the others, it scored but didn't have death on it. In that case, it was the top of Joel's foot that made contact just below Abe's hip.

There was more circling, false attacks with short jabs, and feints by Abe. Joel was stalking now - stalking like an animal that had grown very confident. Heather was yelling down to him to keep his hands up, which he was doing pretty well. What openings he left were covered by the virtue of his leg kicks and takedowns, which acted as a sure deterrent for Abe's counters. Ten minutes passed and Abe hadn't landed anything of consequence.

All of us had sat back down except for Heather. She was leaning against the railing and shouting encouragement, advice, and cautions to her husband. Interestingly, she hadn't grown any more comfortable than before, despite Joel having an easy time of things thus far. It was as though she didn't trust her eyes and thought it was entirely possible for Abe to be setting Joel up for a brilliant counter. This was, of course, something I was silently hoping for as I watched Abe move and play it safe. He was avoiding Joel's quick dash leg shots a little easier than he had at first so that encouraged me but still, after what would have been several rounds of fighting, he still hadn't launched an effective attack. He'd been avoiding the takedowns and blitzes but was not getting away unscathed. Also, I began to notice some swelling high on his forehead where he must have taken a punch I hadn't seen.

We settled into this routine for a little while - Joel stalking without much to show for it except the victory on

imaginary scorecards that wouldn't have mattered even if judges were here because only total victory counted. Abe stalled and waited and kept throwing his attacks short, unwilling to commit fully to them. This wasn't the fight I thought I'd see. Bernard, I thought, looked surprised but was watching with a deep and analytical expression.

"Why doesn't he do something?" Sam said with a tone of futility.

Bernard chuckled and rubbed his thin hands on either side of his chin, like he was scratching them with his gray chin stubble. "He's studying him," the old man said as though it was something that was occurring to him at just that moment. "He's never in a hurry. He's never faced this type of fighter, so he's taking his time and finding his distance and timing."

"He's losing."

"He's running," Heather said irritably. "I thought he'd make a fight of this. I hadn't expected him to taste Joel's strength and then spend the rest of the time running."

"Shut up!" I said, surprising myself as I said it.

That was Abe. That was my brother. I wasn't going to let people talk badly about him anymore without saying something.

She shot me an irritated glance, which I returned with gusto.

Sam saw this exchange, laughed and looked at me weirdly. "Are you always like this when he fights?"

I gave her a look too, though not as severe as the one I gave the princess. Sam laughed to herself and went back to watching the fight.

And then, right after this exchange, Abe's offense roared to life. He saw the moment he was looking for after Joel missed a takedown attempt in response to another false attack. Abe stepped in with a hook that missed and Joel quickly changed levels under it but was unable to gain the advantage as my brother slid away from danger. One of Joel's knees was hovering above the grass and he was coming back up, hands down and away from his face. This was when Abe pounced. Joel's hands had gone down after Abe's legs, trying to catch them and pull the boxer to the earth where he could savagely dominate the weaker man. He needed to grab those legs. It was this that Abe must have been waiting for - getting Joel complacent about those takedown attempts.

Abe shot forward - reversing directions out of his tactical retreat right at the moment that Joel was in the middle of his recovery from the takedown attempt. Abe's back foot pushed his front side forward and his jab darted out with the sudden and terrible swiftness of a leaden projectile. The back foot stayed where it was and the front one landed heel first a split second after the jab smashed Joel square in the left side of the face. A sickening, explosive crack echoed throughout my being when the punch landed. Joel's stricken head shot backwards, his back leg buckled from the impact and his balance was utterly destroyed. It was merely a jab but, alas, it was one of Abe's jabs, which amounts to being hit in the face with a shotgun blast. Joel fell over backwards. This was good for him because it prevented the right from following up that heinous left.

We all gasped - even Amish Mike. All that time he'd done virtually nothing and then there was this. All this time he'd been smacked about the legs and chased and hounded and taunted. This was his moment, though, and he wouldn't have fired until he saw precisely what it was he was looking for and nothing less. This was the mark of the master. I'd heard him say it so many times before: the master is never reckless; he's aggressive without being foolish. Also, the master fought as much with his head as he did with his body. Abe knew he had time...lots of time, so he used it to secure the opening he wanted.

Joel fell backwards, his right hand reached down to the green earth to arrest his descent but he continued to tumble over anyway. The force of the blow knocked him into a sitting position. Even after his rear had hit the ground his head continued backwards and only his tree-trunk like neck kept him from falling completely to his back. Abe circled quickly to the side of his fallen foe, angling to take advantage, ready to finish the wounded man.

Joel wasn't finished, though. He was stunned and down but not badly hurt. He was cognizant enough to turn from his seated position to keep his legs between he and Abe. Also, he had his left hand high in the air, pointing towards Abe in what looked like a lazy Nazi salute, but it was really a good defensive measure designed to keep Abe from reining more punches down on top of him. Abe moved and turned and tried to go right, then left again, but Joel kept him from gaining a positional advantage by scooting and turning. Abe didn't want to risk a full on assault for fear of ending up on the ground with him, that was clear, so the

moment slowly passed and Joel, using his right arm as a post behind him, the other up in the air as a barrier, swung himself up again.

Since she resided on the side of my good ear, I heard Heather resume breathing again. I looked at her and saw that she was nearly as pale white as those listless clouds hanging in the humid sky.

Amazingly, he seemed recovered from the knockdown and his legs showed no ill-effect and Joel actually went right back to his stalking, even launching another frenzied, bitter assault, punctuated by a jab of his own that landed after several punches and a leg kick had missed. The jab wasn't as hard as Abe's had been, but it caught my brother on the cheek as he was pulling away from the other blows. They'd been wide, angled shots that had caused his guard to spread and Joel took advantage by sneaking in the jab. This was surprising enough but then Abe struck again - this time with a kick. Yes, a kick. Abe used his legs for attack.

It was a straight kick - with his right leg - and it whipped forward and caught Joel clean in the lower abdomen, perhaps around the bladder. It was hard to tell precisely where it landed. It was low, though...clearly it would have been illegal in the cage. But here on this day, all was legal, and it had the privilege of being the first openly "foul" tactic of the fight. I was surprised that it was Abe that was not only kicking, but kicking at targets below the waist. Frankly, I would have thought that if either of the two were going to foul, it would be Joel Arthur. I don't really know why this was my thought. Perhaps it was because I rather naturally

assumed that MMA fighters were “dirtier” than boxers. Oh, well. So much for that.

The kick, like the jab Abe had landed before it, caught Joel in the middle of doing something else - in this case, scoring his own jab. Unprepared for it and apparently having no thought that Abe might ever kick, Joel was perfectly defenseless against it, never saw it, and went down again when it landed. The kick had punch on it - that is to say it was super quick and was at the target and back home again before Joel could do anything but fall back to the earth awkwardly, butt flying out behind him. He landed on his hands and knees.

Abe didn't need to circle to gain an advantage this time. He started to kick viciously at Joel's head and scored one solid kick with his sneaker to the top of the head before Joel rolled backwards and then quickly popped up again. He moved side-to-side, giving himself space and touched his head a few times with his hand to see if there was blood. From what I could tell, there wasn't.

They moved about for a few moments again, but Abe was being more aggressive, pushing forward with the menace of a panther moving in for the kill. Joel jumped at him and threw a cross-hook combo that missed. It looked as though he was going to throw another leg kick off the missed combo but Abe never gave him a chance. He slid backwards to avoid the punches and then came roaring back with his own brutal and wickedly fast attack. Indeed, there was an eruption of hand speed from him - several jabs, like bullets from a machine gun, and several rights. Rat-a-tat-tat-tat, boom-boom-boom. The punches flashed out in deadly bursts

and Joel was unable to see them all, for they were of lethal, unspeakable speed. And speed is warfare's most brutal attribute. It is the slayer - speed is, for there is no such thing as a slow accident. Speed is the destroyer of men and armies. To meet a faster foe in battle, one able to move his pieces about, and launch effective campaigns without compromising himself, is to be sure of suffering. To defeat a faster enemy it's required that you absorb punishment. And here, as Abe's magical, surgically skillful fists, roared to life, like a machine gun nest long quiet but now firing in deadly bursts, Joel ran into this pitiless reality. He was punished.

This was the Abe Johnson that I knew; this was the unparalleled champion of preternatural reflexes, blinding speed of hand, foot and eye, and cunning instincts that made other trained men look slow, helpless, feeble. Here he was at last. Abe had been plotting and watching all this time. He is that worst foe for any man in that he studies and collects information about strengths and weaknesses and devises exactly that plan of attack that is most effective while leaving himself the least exposed. And, again, it is that vicious, awesome celerity that pays the bills in order for him to do this. There's no answer to the enemy that has the better plan and the speed to execute it. Joel's arms flailed in front of him like a man swatting at swarming bees. He couldn't get away once Abe had his timing and distance. Yes, yes...my heart was pounding terrifically as I watched and I was clenching my fists, pumping them in the air. That is the peculiar effect of watching such dominance. Bernard was doing it too. We were all in amazement.

Another heavy jab caught Joel after a right missed - the left smashing home with everything on it as the right returned home for defense. The left carried with it the payload of the whole body - Abe's shoulders pumped and whirled, his back foot pushed him forward, and his knees lifted his weight into the attack. He said it often: the fist gets the glory, but it's only along for the ride. It was a monstrous straight left. Joel's head snapped back and the sound of the bare fist striking naked skin and bone was alarming in the extreme.

But, somehow, Joel withstood the punch and remained standing, though he staggered back from the fury of the assault. Abe followed him with more punches, speed blurred fistic flurries that were furious, yet perfectly balanced, shooting out combos in well-timed intervals of two's and three's and four's as he hunted Joel down. That jab was snapping, biting, whipping and Abe's feet - those glorious feet - were wheeling him around as though he were gliding, keeping him on the attack, at the perfect angle to avoid a counter. Joel was moving, moving, ducking, and turning but his movements weren't like Abe's. The one man seemed earth bound and his tormentor appeared to ride above the land and be free of gravity and human limitations. To watch Abe move and strike was to watch a man dance the ultimate dance - a dance of perfect timing and control, a dance of splendid destruction and mayhem. It was beautiful. And it was exhilarating.

For the enemy, it was tragic.

But Abe wasn't punching only. Into the pernicious bombardment of ghostly fast fists there was also a low kick

snuck in here and there. The kicks rode low along the ground, he never picked his knee up high and they looked almost to be exaggerated steps rather than actual kicks. Regardless of what they looked like, Abe smashed the ball of his foot into Joel's shin and knee several times, pounding them with the bottom of his sneakers. Even this gave Joel no respite from the punches, though. Since the kicks shoveled along the ground, they didn't disrupt Abe's balance enough to cause a meaningful lull, so he kicked, pivoted to an angle, threw more punches as he moved forward, forward, then to another angle - and then there would be another kick.

Finally, Joel was able to free himself enough to throw a looping overhand as he ducked his head. It missed wide as Abe sidestepped, but then Joel shot down and dove hard to the ground, like a starving man going after a morsel of bread. This was what Joel needed. He caught Abe's left ankle with the dive and wrapped it up tightly. He looked for a moment as a man clinging to a life preserver in the midst of a violent storm at sea. Abe pulled and hopped awkwardly, trying to get away - the splendid grace of his movements eradicated by this simple maneuver. Suddenly, the tide had again changed. Joel worked his way to a kneeling position, struggling to hold on and develop a point of leverage so he could go after the rest of his man. He kept scooting forward and, despite Abe's efforts to the contrary, he was getting closer. Heather was yelling, "You got him! You got him!"

Then, it happened: Abe lost his balance, tottered, reeled, hopped one more time vainly, and then fell.

I've never felt such fear in my life. It was like seeing a man pulled into the water by a shark. I'm sure I gasped because I was utterly horrified. Sam appeared whiter than Heather had before. And Heather, well, she was pumping her fists maniacally and making all sorts of exclamations of glee and passion. It was terrible to hear.

Bernard, on the other hand, was unmoved. He sat there watching, a look of intensity on his face like he was reading a great book.

Abe began to scramble the very moment he hit the ground, pulling his free leg up and trying to get to his side. Joel, now with his chance to exact revenge, worked quickly but with great control. In fact, the action slowed. Joel had his knees on the ground, and paused to get a hold of Abe's other leg so that he couldn't kick him. Abe paused too, still partly on his side, scooting back now and again as they jockeyed for position. Suddenly they would erupt in movement and pause just as quickly as they started. It stayed like this for a minute - maybe more, it was hard to tell exactly. The sun beat down on them. The breeze was still. The heat must have been unbearable.

Joel was able to work his way around Abe's legs, still on the side of him, by pushing down on the left leg and shooting to the corner. Abe, knowing that he was in serious trouble if the stronger man was able to mount him, tried to push him off and get away but Joel's grappling skills were too good. Personally, I thought that Abe was giving a good account of himself considering the circumstances but this was a fight. Being close didn't count for anything but a butt kicking in fighting.

Joel pressed and held with his hips and whenever he got a free hand he pounded down at Abe who, for the most part, covered himself from significant damage. Even still, things didn't look pretty. It was like seeing Secretariat in a pig pen; it was awful and I felt sick in a way that despair and hopelessness sickens a man. I fought the urge to turn away, run inside and cry and, believe me, it was an incredible urge. I truly didn't want to watch anymore.

The semi-side mount that Joel had achieved gave Abe nothing to do but wait. The problem was, though, that it offered Joel the repeated opportunity to pound on him, which Joel did, battering away with impunity, striking Abe more times in the head than he'd been hit in his entire boxing career. Joel was hitting hammer-fist style most of the time, pounding, slamming, striking without worry. He was ever patient because he knew that there was nothing my brother could do.

To stay there like that was unthinkable. Though the blows weren't tremendously heavy, they were strong enough to inflict some damage and if enough time went by, Abe might very well succumb from their accumulation. He was working vainly to get out from under the assault, fighting for inches but it was all in futility. So, after Joel got a little greedy perhaps, and threw an elbow into the mix, that smacked Abe on top of the head, his hands covering his face, he shot around and tried to push Joel off of him. It was a great risk because it took his legs away from a blocking position and freed Joel to go after him with his whole body.

Joel, being so much superior on the ground, immediately seized the opportunity and another scramble ensued. Abe

fought off a mount and they scrambled left and right, kicking up grass and dirt, which stuck to their sweaty arms, back, shoulders and chest. It was a mismatch, though. Joel was too quick on the ground, too strong, and too experienced. He ended up taking Abe's back and started working on securing a rear choke.

All was empty to me. The air drained out of the sky and I almost collapsed but was able to fall backward into my seat. To watch any champion fall is tragic; the vision is powerful, overwhelming and always a little sad - even if he's not your champion. It's simply heartbreaking to see the mighty vanquished at last. When Ali was pummeled by Holmes in '80, when a quick fisted kid named Terry Norris smashed Sugar Ray from corner to corner, when Buster closed Iron Mike's eye, knocked his mouthpiece out and left him groping for his senses on the canvas - your heart ached. Great champions lose the way anything great and precious passes - with melancholy and reluctance, and we are reluctant to let them go because in their passing we are reminded that all things fade.

But to see Joel take Abe's back and wrap his massive forearms around his neck and begin to squeeze the air out of him was altogether worse than any other champion falling. To see him collapse to his knees with that behemoth wrapped around him like a massive snake, choking the life out of him, was to witness all of my admiration and security vanish too. He was my life and my confidence. I shuddered and gasped. Heather was yelling furiously for her husband but I didn't look at her. I was transfixed in misery and disbelief. I couldn't move or alter my gaze so I watched

them out of vacant, lifeless eyes. Joel was choking Abe and me at the same time.

There is quiet in the suddenness of defeat that I'd never experienced - well, at least not since I was five. Abe had always been a winner so I never had to really deal with the fact that I was nothing but a dirt poor orphan with nothing to offer the woman I loved and no plan for life but to write and read and think and write some more. I was now sitting in the seat that others had sat in before me. Defeat and reality rolled over me in silent, heavy waves and took away my pretensions with offensive and ghastly matter-of-factness. This was the nature of defeat and death in this world. Silence. Quiet. Disbelief. The question hanging from my lips just as it must have been on the others that Abe had once beaten: how can this be happening?

It was like this for me. I was sinking into a bottomless, depthless, despair and then I realized that Joel was having issues. He couldn't sink the choke in. He was switching arms back and forth, trying the right, then the left, and so on and I couldn't see what the issue was until I heard Heather say it. She said it in disbelief, the words floating on the air in front of us like they belonged in the nightmarish dream I had been descending into.

"He's biting."

Yes. Abe was pretty good at this fouling business. He wasn't playing. I never saw him spit his mouthpiece out but there it was in the grass.

In order for Joel to sink in the choke and finish him, he had to get his arms under Abe's chin, but this brought them into position for Abe to latch on and sink his teeth into the

exposed flesh. Abe was fighting those chokes off, using his hands to pull and shifting his body, turning his head, and, yes, he was biting at Joel's forearms and biceps whenever he could. Abe was turning his head slightly so that he was using his side teeth, not the front, and trying to control the exposed limb with his hands. As soon as he clamped down, Joel recoiled in pain and switched arms. He tried to cross face and crank instead of going for another choke but Abe was able to clamp down on Joel's bicep and really get his teeth into the bicep.

Joel jumped to his feet and yelled, trying to get his arm free but Abe wasn't letting it go so, in obvious agony, he moved around to the side of his tormentor to get better leverage. But as soon as he was about to get it free, Abe, who was on his knees chomping away, like a ravenous man working on his first meal in a week, shot furiously into Joel. He buried his head in his chest and pushed forward in a fury while firing horrific uppercuts into Joel's groin and low abdomen. Joel was reeling. Abe used the top of his head to keep Joel's face back - placing it on his upper chest and whacking him in the chin with it a couple of times. But it was the body work that was most nasty.

I'd seen Abe working the bags the other day and noticed that he was doing just this tactic. I hadn't understood it at the time, though I thought it looked a little weird. He was pressing his head against the bag and throwing such short, short punches - maybe six inches to a foot from the bag - powered by a quick jerk of his hip and shoulder and not by swinging his arms. It looked strange and he smiled at me weirdly when he was done and had noticed my puzzled

expression. But here was the application of that tactic. Horrifically short, brutal low body shots - none of them legal in the ring or the cage. They were all landing below the belt and they landed with impressive power - with loud whacks as they dug into Joel's privates and bladder. Without groin protection...well, I almost pitied Joel.

I looked to Sam in my excitement, now that the tide seemed to have turned. I was thinking of hugging and kissing her in my jubilation but she was gone. Her chair was empty. I turned to look around but she wasn't on the deck. Sometime during the last drama she'd slipped away. Well, this was perhaps the only moment in all history when I wouldn't go looking for her. I had to see what was going to happen.

Heather was screaming. Her beautiful face was contorted into a hateful, angry scowl and I must say that I instantly understood her acrimony for there she was - in my place moments before - watching her husband, an unbeaten warrior in his own right, a perfect specimen of violence and athleticism, losing via bites and low blows. It had to sting.

Bernard, strangely, had a most bemused look, not an intense mask of heightened passions as one would expect from watching such a fight. And he was nodding his head and smiling to himself as though he was witnessing something he had suspected he might see.

Well, one of those heavy, short beauties landed squarely and buckled Joel badly and he fell. Abe was ruthless, utterly ruthless, and kicked and stomped at him. Heather collapsed back against the house, nearly to tears, aghast at the barbaric spectacle unfolding before her. This wasn't an

athletic competition; it was a fight between two great combat athletes. Even for those of us who were used to the sound and fury of ring and cage fights, this was something that was almost too visceral, too shocking, too inhumane to watch - especially when it was your guy that was on the business end of the beating. It was hard to watch. I felt sorry for Heather.

Joel, though, was still fighting, and he rolled out of the firestorm of kicks and stomps reigning down upon him. When he got up, bloodied, full of dirt and grass and dust, wincing in pain from those low blows, he gained a measure of respect from me that I had previously only given my brother. To absorb that type of beating - to survive it and come back into the fight again - especially against the type of man that was administering the beating, is a singular thing. It's what warriors dream of doing and it's what men who watch warriors dream of seeing. I thought as they squared off again, both full of the blood, dirt and sweat of battle, that neither man would be defeated today. One would lose, but neither would be defeated. Both were champions.

Most shocking, though, was when we all got a good look at Joel's face. It was now a hideous mask of swelling and pain. That pulverizing jab that had landed before the ground fighting and all those blistering, whistling one-two's had turned Joel's youthful, rugged, handsome face into one that looked riddled by a medieval plague. His lower lip was cut and swollen. A part of it was torn, near the corner of his mouth, and was hanging like loose skin. The top of his lip was swollen to several times the size it was before the

punches had landed. And his nose was misshapen. The tip of it was pushed so far to the side that it looked to be directly under his right eye. Seeing that, it made me think of the old boxing manuals from the bare knuckle days that Abe read and how they instructed pupils to keep their head turned slightly, with their chin elevated a bit - an unthinkable thing in today's boxing - in order to avoid taking direct hits to the middle of the face and eyes. Yes, indeed, Joel's face wasn't a face anymore. He looked like someone had dropped Mr. Potato Head down the stairs. He was hamburger meat.

"He can't breathe," I heard Heather say, and then I realized that Joel's nose was so badly mangled that he was having to breathe from his mouth and that he was wheezing badly at those times when he didn't. She buried her face in her hands.

There was no stopping the fight.

Abe wasn't messed up like Joel was. He had that lump high on his forehead and a few other knots from the hammer-fists but other than that he seemed to be unscathed. There is, evidently, a resident unfairness in getting into a fight with a great striker as opposed to a grappler-submission guy. The striker beats his man into submission; a submission artist, unless he breaks a limb in the process, doesn't bludgeon his foe in such a way as the boxer does.

Once back on their feet, it was Abe's game again. He instantly took the initiative and took the fight to Joel. Two jabs rifled through and slammed Joel's head back. Joel did respond with another leg kick but Abe ignored it and

whipped in two more jabs, a right and then another jab. After the last jab, with Joel's head snapped back, his eyes up in the blue heavens, Abe sent home a vicious upward kick to the groin. It landed unexpectedly, and solidly, right between the legs. Joel crashed down again.

But he scampered up.

Joel's will, apparently, was limitless, irrepressible. Through his pain he charged forward behind a heavy jab, threw a looping overhand with murder on it, and tried to grab hold of Abe again. And he did all this while letting go of a yell that was almost primal. It was loud and vicious - a roar against the pain, a war-trumpet from deep in a soul that refused to be defeated.

But Abe, still moving smoothly on legs that had been battered, slid easily away.

Joel came on again, tripling the jab, feet hurrying behind it, trying to catch up to the faster man, but this time Abe countered with his own jab - from an angle created by his head movement and footwork - and then with a right. Joel's head snapped around sickly. Blood sprayed in the air as though his jugular had been cut. Abe's fists wore the blood of his foe's wounds.

They broke off momentarily and were moving just below us. Bernard and I leaned forward to see them and I noticed Sam standing below. She was on the edge of the lower deck. She looked as miserable as someone can look, heartsick, forlorn and quite near to tears. And yet there was exhilaration in her eyes too - the triumph of a battle going your way. I must have had the same look. There was also the great and utter fatigue of that roller coaster of emotions

we'd all been on. It felt very much like we were pulling back into the station now.

Abe threw a few more snapping low kicks, which cracked Joel in the shins and knees as he plodded forward. Abe would fake a punch and Joel would react like a man swatting at bees again, his head would shoot this way and that, and his arms would flail about, trying to blindly catch the attack. For all of this, Abe would whack him low with the kick. Joel's shins - especially on his lead right leg - were raw and turning reddish purple before our eyes.

Then the boxing master faked one of those kicks. His leg pumped forward and landed just short of being a full-on weapon, snapping harmlessly against the surface of Joel's bloody and hammered shin bone. The real attack was one of those vicious jabs again. It speared Joel clean in the face, just around the eye. It was worse than the others because the fake leg kick caused him to lift his leg slightly and that made him bring his head forward just a little - as if Abe's punch needed any help. Well, it hit him and you heard the crack ring in your ears like a fastball and bat colliding at a baseball game. Abe's shoulder extended, his hips swung up and through, and his fist whipped into what was left of Joel's face.

Down he went again. He was flat on his back, moving slightly, hands gripping at the grass involuntarily. Abe looked at him and watched in disbelief as again, impossibly, stupidly, without any reason to it whatsoever, Joel pulled himself to a kneeling position.

Abe could have kicked him in the head. He could have grabbed him and kneed him in the face. Instead, he said,

“Do you retire?”

Joel looked up. Only his left eye was working - the right one was closed from an angry swelling that had a trickle of blood coming from it, possibly from the eye itself. Despite this and his other injuries, many probably hidden from our observation post, he lifted himself up and stood as proudly as a man can stand when he looks to be cheating death by mere inches. With his upper lip swollen grotesquely, like it was pumped full of air or like he was the victim of a horrendous Hollywood plastic surgery, and his lower lip hanging off his face, his nose distorted at an impossible angle, he grunted and shook his head. He lifted his fists and said, “We’re not done.” His speech was slurred and blood spit out as he said it.

“Retire.”

“Ight,” Joel responded. Apparently, he couldn’t say the word fight correctly now.

“It’s not worth it.”

“It is.”

Joel charged him again. Abe avoided the rush but didn’t counter attack. In the middle of the yard, Abe looked up at Bernard and said, “Then I quit. I won’t hit him anymore. It’s over.”

“Then Joel is the winner,” Amish Mike said from below.

Abe looked at Joel with resounding pity and respect at once and shook his head.

“Then so be it.”

At this point, Joel turned and looked up at his wife. Heather’s tears, held at bay until that point, broke open when she saw the battered face of her beloved look up at

her. And they were communicating something in the way they looked at one another. He was shaking his head. She returned a look of grave sympathy, fear and yet understanding too. She patted her pregnant belly. Then she smiled through her falling tears and nodded. There was great love in the whole thing.

“No,” Joel said, turning back to Abe, then looking at Amish Mike. “I retire. It’s over. He wins.”

And it was, at last, over.

CHAPTER 16

WITH THE FIGHT FINISHED, Abe lowered his head and it looked like he was saying a prayer. Joel stood watching him, wearily, his face an ugly, bloody, and swollen mask of suffering. When Abe raised his head again the former combatants, now somehow brothers, looked at each other. Weary smiles of joy that only fighters can know broke out on their faces and they embraced there in the middle of the trampled grass that had been their battlefield. A breeze blew in from the water, felt cool on my hot face, and they hugged like men come home from war, which is so very strange to see in that they never had a common enemy but each other. Even still, the time for war had passed and they reveled in that new reality and in the fact that the struggle was over. This is the strangeness that I see every time men hug and exhort one another after such intense and personal battle. This is where it's always clear to me that such men never hate one another; they merely use one another to challenge and defeat themselves. And, indeed, with that noted, there was no way for me to hate Joel and his pregnant bride. I was still standing there and processing

what I'd just seen, what great deeds of athleticism and honor I'd witnessed, when the enormity of it all hit me.

Joel broke from the embrace, kept a hand on Abe's shoulder as Abe patted his arm. They nodded. Heather was next to me, trying not to cry, looking down at her husband and soon to be father of the baby she carried. There was a pitiful and heart breaking sadness about her and I thought of how much they'd just sacrificed. They'd done it together; he had surrendered the match and the riches in accord with her. He did it for honor. There he was - a man that wanted the right thing, the higher thing, that thing of exquisite beauty, more than he wanted the money.

This is exactly what Bernard had been saying all along was the point. Now, I saw it with my own eyes. How great it was to see. And they did it even with no one watching but us; they did it despite no one ever knowing but a dying man, his assistant, a wife, a brother, and an artist. They did it in this privacy, in defiance of our new world that worships fame over substance, popularity over character, and wealth over truth.

Heather moved past me at the same moment that I saw Sam come out from underneath the deck. She headed straight for Abe and when she reached him, she hugged him tightly, with great fervency. At first, he looked as shocked as I was but he gave in and hugged her back, closing his eyes and resting his cheek against the top of her head. It was a long embrace, full of tenderness and great relief.

Joel stumbled toward the house. Heather met him a few steps past where Sam and Abe were embracing. She

stopped and examined him tearfully, placing her fingers carefully upon him, seemingly afraid of touching him too much for fear that he might shatter into pieces and fall dead to the earth. Yes, that was the impression it gave. She touched him, caressed him, smiled at him through tears and he placed a hand on her swelling stomach and smiled back at her. But when he smiled his face contorted into an even more gruesome picture and it looked so bad, so hideous as to be almost comical, except that it truly wasn't. Her man was beaten - beaten badly. I'd never seen anyone look like such an abomination after a fight. Such, I suppose, is the damage of bare fists.

"I can't believe he surrendered," I said to Bernard, who was still sitting there, taking it all in. "He could have had all that money."

"No. That was never an option. Not for a man like him."

"He's got a baby coming."

"The baby has more than money. He's got him as a father."

I nodded my head in silent agreement. He was right.

"I'm gonna go see Abe," I said. "Do you need anything?"

"No, son. I've got everything I need."

For a few hours after the fight Abe was laying on the sofa downstairs in the living room. Heather rushed off to take Joel to the hospital. She spoke for a while with Amish Mike about where to go before leaving. He told her that Bernard had a nurse coming in soon but she gave that no thought whatsoever and hurried off with poor Joel.

Abe fell asleep for a little while and when he woke up he drank several glasses of water. His face was more banged

up, which is usually the case after fights - more wounds give themselves up with the passage of time. The top of his head was ringed with angry welts, courtesy of Joel's overhands, hammer-fists and an elbow. "I can't believe that he didn't break his hand," Abe said as he touched some of the damage with a careful finger.

Bernard came down and sat in the chair next to the sofa. Amish Mike grabbed a seat at the counter next to me. Sam sat on the other end of the couch from Abe, his legs crossing over her lap. She was holding a bag of ice to the outside of his leg.

"I'm surprised your leg didn't break," she said.

Abe laughed a laugh that had no energy. He spoke as if he were falling off to sleep.

"He was strong," he said. "Freakishly strong."

"Were you surprised how well he did on his feet?" Bernard asked.

Abe shook his head. "He's a great fighter...an all-around fighter. I was lucky he didn't knock me out."

"Well, he almost choked you out."

"Yeah. Yeah. I was lucky there too."

"Did you plan to bite in case you got in trouble?" I asked.

"It's always an option."

"Well, you certainly didn't limit yourself to boxing," Bernard observed in that jovial, happy way of his. He was the only one amongst us that didn't look morose and worried. Funerals were happier, more lively places than our house that day.

"You forget that boxing has always had those tools - whether kicking, butting, eye-gouging, or even biting. We

have those rules because we want it semi-civilized.”

“Don’t talk like that,” Sam said. “Don’t talk about the fight.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nonsense,” Bernard said as though alarmed. “Men talk about fighting. That’s almost as much fun as the fight itself...the talking about it afterwards.”

Sam made a face at him and said, “He needs rest right now.”

“I’m fine.”

“It looked like Joel needed an ambulance,” I said.

“He’s got some serious issues,” Amish Mike said. “His face is gonna need all sorts of help. His lip...man! I’ve never seen anything like that.”

Sam lowered her head and closed her eyes as though the conversation was giving her a headache. I didn’t doubt for a second that it probably was. When she moved the ice on Abe’s leg you could see the swelling and what looked like angry, devilish rashes on the side of the thigh. He’d gotten up and moved around a few times and you could tell that the leg was tightening up and he was hobbling a bit.

“Well, his nose and eye were no better,” Bernard said with an amazed shake of his head. “Who would’ve thought he’d hang in there like that? It was that jab you caught him with that started the whole thing. That was the punch. Every time you landed the jab he was one step closer to the end.”

“Nasty,” Amish Mike concurred.

“It was the low kick that set it up,” Abe said as he pulled his legs around, which caused him to wince, and he sat up

straight. "The shin and knee kick bugged him more than he showed. It was landing solidly and set the jab up nicely. Plus, it allowed me to establish my range. I think that kick was the key."

"Where'd you learn that?" Amish Mike asked.

Abe smiled with mischief in his eyes.

"Yeah, where?" I chimed in.

"Bruce Lee," he said. "He called it 'the giant killer' and so it was. I've always been a fan, ya know, and whenever I had the chance I'd play around with some things I'd seen him do. That low kick - he'd say it was like a boxer's jab...so that's how I practiced it. I just used the left leg like I used the jab. I wasn't comfortable at first...didn't wanna get caught with my leg in the air and end up on my back, ya know? That was the key defensively - not ending up on my back with him on top of me. I had to keep everything in front of me. So, it was the jab and that kick. And that groin kick knocked the fight right out of him. He wasn't the same guy after that. He stayed in there but it drained the fight out of him...it sapped his strength."

"Bruce Lee?" Bernard chuckled. "Who'd a thunk it?"

"I know. But I've read him and watched him for years... his style and speed. Plus, they say that he was the father of MMA. Well, that worked against Joel today. Lee was the master of all-out fighting...of kicking, punching, biting, grappling and all that. He didn't believe in rules in fights. That was the other issue that Joel had trouble with."

"I'll say," I agreed.

"Don't you feel bad about what you did to him?" Sam asked.

Bernard laughed and smiled sarcastically at her. Abe looked at her with a deep seriousness in his eyes and said, "You saw how it ended."

"Yeah."

No one said anything for a minute. We sat there in an uneasy silence. I felt guilty that I was so happy Abe had won.

"Well, Tuck," Sam said and stood up. "I'm glad that you're feeling better today. And I'm glad that you had your fight and that no one was killed. I hope it did for you what you wanted." She kissed him on the head and turned for the door. "Get some rest. I'll see you later."

"Honey," he said after her. She stopped and turned. "I told you that I'd give you the property."

She stood there and shook her head in a weird way. "No," she said.

"Your father won't win, honey."

"I don't wanna fight, Tuck. I'm sick of it. I'd rather keep the memories and move on. Do you understand? It's not the property...it's you." She looked at him strongly, with a deep desire to be understood. There were tears forming and her lip trembled. "Look at the price Abe and Joel just paid. Their bodies bear the wounds of their battle; my heart would bear the wounds of this battle."

"So you just walk away and leave it in his hands?"

"No, Tuck. No. I leave it in my heart the way it ought to be - free...magical...innocent. No fight can preserve that, only strip it from me. Even if I kept the physical space and could live here until I was an old lady, the very things that I

would've wanted to keep it for would have been crushed by the fighting over it."

Bernard sighed heavily.

"I'm sorry that you don't see that, Tuck. I understand that's your way. But try and see that what you gave me in my heart, and what this place has meant to both of us, is best preserved by me staying simple."

"Amish Mike will make sure you don't lose it."

"No, Tuck. It's already lost when you're gone. Do you see that? I don't want your property. I want you. What good does it do for me to have this to myself anyway? You - us - we made it special. My father can't have what I have anyway. This is beyond him. He can possess something physically but he'll never have the heart."

"So, you just give in to the men like your father?" Bernard said bitterly.

Abe said, "The meek shall inherit the earth."

She looked at him with a look of thankfulness and surprise. "Something like that," she said. She was choking up and couldn't contain herself so she waved her hand at us and then covered her mouth with it, drew a deep breath and then left. I watched her until she disappeared down the walkway to the gazebo.

After a moment of silence, Abe said to Amish Mike, "You can transfer the money to my account as soon as you'd like."

Amish Mike looked at Bernard but the old man was lost in thought, looking off at nothing in particular.

"Okay," he said to Abe. He stood up. "Let's go up to the pod and take care of the transfer."

Abe hobbled off after him as he walked down the hallway toward the stairs. I was going to go to the gazebo and see if Sam was still there when Bernard snapped out of his contemplations and said, "Hey, Lusty...you know what I wanna do, right now?"

"What?"

"How about you and me take Sam to a ballgame?"

"Now? Where?"

"There's a minor league game in Tampa tonight at seven. If we leave in the next few minutes we'll get there in plenty of time. Beats hanging around here - not being able to talk about the fight and all."

I made a face. I didn't really like the idea of going all the way to Tampa but was hoping that I could spend alone time with Sam again out on the water.

"Aw, c'mon kid. I'm a dying old man. Ya can't deny me the simple joys of life at a time like this. And I can't go alone. I don't have the energy for it."

CHAPTER 17

IT WAS another thirty minutes before we were ready to roll. Abe stayed behind to go over business stuff with Amish Mike and, frankly, they both looked at us like we were a little nuts when we told them where we were going. Clearly, though, Bernard was all fired up and was having trouble settling back down after the fight. And who can deny the requests of a terminal old guy anyway?

Well, Sam didn't want to go but decided that spending time with Bernard was important so she and I waited out front for him as he went to get a car from the hangar thing in the back of the property. When he pulled around the house he was driving a black muscle car. He parked next to us and got out but left the engine running, which was the loudest thing I'd heard in days, even louder than Abe's truck.

"You're driving," he said to me. "It'll put some hair on your chest."

"I like my chest smooth and uncomplicated."

"You're a weird kid." He walked around and held the door for Sam to get in the back. She asked if I could drive a

shift.

“Ah...that’s a negative.”

Bernard looked annoyed. “What the heck, Charlie? Can you barbecue?”

“Frankly, I don’t see why they even allow a standard transmission on the road. I mean, how am I supposed to text and shift and take selfies all at the same time? Impossible.”

“Just get in,” Bernard snapped at me. Sam walked back around and got behind the wheel. When the doors were closed and we were ready to go, Bernard said, “Does it bother you to be so emasculated?”

“You aren’t driving either.”

“I’m dying.”

“Stop saying that,” Sam insisted as she pressed the clutch and shifted into gear. We took off without the automotive flourish one might expect from such a car.

“Well, I’m a writer.”

“Hemingway would have had one of these babies. Do you even know what this is?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“You don’t know, do you?”

They were giggling like two children.

“It’s a Dodge Challenger,” I said triumphantly.

“Charger,” Sam corrected.

“Right. Charger. That’s what I meant. Charger.”

“It’s a four-barrel, son.”

“It’s a shotgun?”

Sam started laughing again and Bernard turned around to look at me with evident exasperation. “Son,” he said, “on

a normal day, I'd throw you out and make you walk."

"Cause I don't know anything about classic cars? Big deal. I know boxing. Boxing's more manly than cars."

"That's true," Sam laughed.

"But still," he sighed, "it's not right."

"Hey, wanna stop for pie on the way by the crazy lady's place?"

"You mean Hope's place?" He asked.

"Hope? That's her name?"

"She's lived here for thirty years or more. I think she's from Georgia. Her husband left her and she got money from the divorce, came down here on a lark one weekend - just driving to take her mind off things - and saw that place. It was an old gas station - put out of business by newer ones down the road. The old owner had died and the kids didn't want it. They didn't wanna be stuck managing a little station in the middle of nowhere and they were trying to sell it. I heard that she bought it on the spot."

"Well, we should stop in and support her. I'm hungry anyway," I said. "Why give our money to a big chain?"

"Those big chains are owned by the little guy," Bernard said. "They sell franchises. It's all the same."

"No, it's not. The franchise sucks the life out of it."

"That's a fact. That's why I love Asheville," Sam said as she pushed down on the gas and the engine roared. She looked at Bernard and winked. We were on the main highway leading back to the coast, all flat and open.

We were doing a little over 100 when I checked the speedometer. Bernard started whooping and hollering and laughing. She flew around a couple of cars that were probably doing the speed limit, passing them with resounding ease. We continued to gain speed but I couldn't bring myself to look again to see how fast we were going. All the backseat had were those old lap belts. Great. Great, I thought. If we lost control, considering that there was water on either side of us, if I was still in one piece I'd have to swim anyway.

Oddly enough, Abe never drove over the speed limit so this was my first time at warp speed. I could feel my chest and shoulders getting all tight and stiff as the exhilaration and fear climbed within me. Bernard turned to look at me and Sam checked on me too from the rear-view mirror. I think I managed a smile in my terror.

At such speeds we were at the pie place in short order. Sam hit the brakes hard and slid sideways into the parking lot, kicking up gravel and stone from the edge - where the shoulder ran down into the property. The force of the braking and sudden turn whipped me right, then left and all the while Bernard was laughing and saying, "There's nothing like it! Aha! Nothing like it!"

The crazy pie lady - Hope - was unperturbed by our Hollywood style entrance. Fortunately, there were no other cars in the parking lot and Sam brought the Charger right up to the front, not parking on the side, like we were going to rob the place and race off down the highway eating purloined pie and rummaging through ill-gotten stacks of classic rock albums. Well, anyway, Hope, who was sitting on

the front porch in one of the chairs, apron on, didn't get up or look exasperated, which I thought she surely would be. Instead, she sat there shaking her head and smiled at us as we piled out. I was the last one out because, frankly, I was more than a bit rattled. I'd never done even a roller-coaster up until that point.

She really laughed when she took a look at me. Bernard was cracking up and smacked me on the back. "We're making a man out of ya," he was saying. I truly, truly, don't understand what nearly killing yourself has to do with being a man.

Well, Bernard went up and gave Hope a big hug.

"Glad to see you're both back to hot-rodding," she said. But then she looked at him more closely and her face grew concerned. "What's the matter with you, Bernard Tucker? You're looking a little rough around the edges."

He put his arm around her and they walked off into the shop speaking low to each other, in intimate whispers I couldn't hear.

"I didn't know they knew each other," I said to Sam as we drifted towards the back of the shop to see the albums. When we got there, Sam noticed that the record player she liked was gone.

"Oh, man!" She called back to Hope. "Someone bought my record player."

The crazy pie lady was still talking to Bernard back up front and they were arm and arm now, a little sickly skinny white guy and a big, wild haired black lady, looking like they were an oddball old married couple. The sight of it made me laugh - a painful, rueful laugh. To stand there amidst the

memories, everything quaint and unique, and to watch them up there like that...it filled me with an immense feeling of sweet loss. There's never any standing still in this world and what you love is forever passing; there's no holding onto any of it.

I looked at Sam and saw that this was the source of her sadness - it was in her eyes as she looked at them and at the empty table that used to have the record player.

Hope called back in her big, jovial voice, "Yes, child. A man came in a few days back. Went right for it and bought it on the spot. Another fella was looking at it and thinking of buying it so that man offered me double."

"Double?"

"Yeah. And with this economy...with all that craziness going on up in Wall Street, I was more than happy to sell it." She saw the look on Sam's face and added, "Sorry, Samantha. But you should know that I think the man that bought it loved it like you do. He understood its worth. You woulda liked him."

"That's cool. I'm just sad to see it go. I already have one anyway." Then she turned and mumbled something, which I think was, "Not that it really matters anyway." I could be wrong, of course, but I was pretty sure that's what I heard.

"It's good to see you guys, though," Hope continued. "You all are the first people in here in the last two days. What's a girl to do with so much pie?"

When we were leaving she walked us out. We were all carrying pumpkin pie. I was surprised that Bernard said we could eat in the car, considering that it was a classic and in

such clean, mint condition. "You can vac it after I croak," he said.

She waved us goodbye and we tore back onto the highway and drove much slower because Sam was eating. The highway was empty, even when we reached the mainland and headed south. I was busy looking around at the Florida landscape while Bernard talked about the fight. The more we drove, the less hardwoods there were and the more difficult it was to distinguish between what was a tree and what was a shrub. From the route we were on, I saw a plentiful array of pines that looked scruffy and sun-scrubbed in the sandy terrain. Their scaly, gray bark looked to me to be the best a tree could do in a climate that offered it moist, sandy soil and withering heat.

We were approaching Crystal River when we got pulled over by the police. Sam had gotten heavy on the gas again. I wasn't paying attention to how fast she was going because, like I said, there really wasn't any traffic and the road was all flat and wide-open and I'd settled into the muscular hum of the engine and was blissfully watching the scenery from my back seat perch.

She had to literally roll the window down when the cop approached.

"Sorry I was speeding, officer," she said and extended her license and the insurance card that Bernard handed her from his pocket.

He looked at it and scanned the vehicle. "You were doing ninety."

"Sorry," Sam said and winced.

"Detroit muscle!" Bernard laughed.

The officer leaned down and looked at him, saw that infectious smile and childlike enthusiasm and chuckled too. "Where you guys heading?"

"Tampa. To see a ballgame," Bernard replied. "Figured I'd let these youngsters know what it's like to drive this puppy."

The cop started asking Bernard what was under the hood and they started talking about horse-power, torque and all that car stuff that I found boring so I sat silently and enjoyed watching Sam. She knew far more about cars than I ever would have guessed. This made sense when I thought about it, since she was so close to her grandfather and they'd talked a bit on the way about all the drives they'd take when she was visiting - how they'd drive all over north and central Florida in the GTO, the '70 Mustang, a Chevelle, a '69 Camaro and something I think they called a Cuba, but I must have heard that wrong. I mean, who names a car a Cuba? I was going to ask them but I'd already been laughed at enough for one day, thank you.

This went on for a little bit and the humid air was pouring into the car and I was starting to sweat.

"Well, listen," the cop said, "I don't think you guys should go to Tampa. It's looking pretty rough down there."

"Huh?"

"You haven't been following it?"

"What?"

He looked at us with a mixture of amusement and suspicion, which, I suppose, the latter is something that comes rather naturally for cops in any situation. In retrospect, though, I certainly understand his puzzlement.

"Things haven't been peachy since the economy tanked," he explained. "You probably don't notice it too much up here and back where you're coming from, but you get down into Tampa and the other cities and things are getting hairy."

"Oh. I haven't watched the news in...a few years," Sam said. "It depresses me."

"Well, ma'am, it'll really depress you now." The officer gave her the I.D. and registration back, told us to be careful and let us go - without so much as a warning. A little rankled but undaunted, we took off down the highway again. Sam gave me her phone because it was newer and was getting a better internet signal. Mine, frankly, hadn't gotten internet since Abe and I pulled off the interstate on the way down to the fight and that's how I'd usually see the news - or maybe on TV at night if Abe was watching, but with no TV on at Bernard's, the only thing I'd seen since we arrived was the hysterical news at the dark Mexican place the other night.

"Did you already get tickets?" Sam asked.

"Yeah. I called the box office. They're at Will Call."

"Is the stadium near a bad area?"

"The whole city's a bad area," Bernard laughed. "It's right across the street from the Bucs stadium, remember? So, it's in a bad football area."

"Oh. Yeah. We've been there. It's been a few years, though."

"I'm still not getting anything," I said as I watched the symbol on the phone swirl around in technological futility, signifying that it couldn't load the page.

"Next gas station, pull in," Bernard said. "We'll get the news the old fashion way - a newspaper."

"They still print those things?" Sam smiled.

When we were approaching Crystal River there was a large gas station and convenience store on our side of the divided highway. Sam pulled up to the pump after Bernard told her it was a good idea to top it off.

"Whoa!" He blurted out, eyes wide in amazement, staring up at the sign near the road.

We looked and searched - puzzled - and then we saw it and had the very same reaction.

"What the..." Sam muttered in disbelief.

Gas was triple what it had been. I'd never seen it that high before and kept staring at the number as if it were incomprehensible. We'd passed other gas stations on the way but I guess we hadn't paid any attention to the prices or, maybe, they weren't as high further north. There was no way to tell. We were getting out of the car and I was thinking that I really never look at the prices of anything too much. I just always expect to have enough for the basics - you know, gas and food.

We went inside and there was a man behind an island counter that stood in the middle of the store. To his left there were three aisles that were all empty. The cooler beyond the bare shelves, where there used to be every sort of cold beverage the average American wanted - sodas, beer, bottled water, a myriad of multi-colored sport drinks, and assorted juices - were empty too. To the right of the counter was what looked to be a donut and muffin stand (also empty) a coffee station with creamers and sugar, cups

and tops, and a beverage center of fountain drinks. Looking around in stunned dismay, all of us thinking that there was no way this was happening, we must have looked like the three biggest idiots in Florida.

The worker was a middle-aged guy around 45, I suppose, with thin, greasy looking hair, a white shirt with the company logo over the heart, and the look of a man that needed a cigarette. Of course, all of the smokes were behind the counter and they were out too.

"Do you still have gas?" Bernard asked him.

"At these prices...yeah. A little. Just got some last night and that's all we could afford. People stopped filling up yesterday afternoon. A few people came by earlier, saw the price and split."

"You'd think there's a hurricane coming," Bernard said as he glanced around dismally.

"Yeah." The man said. "I think we'd be better off with one than with what we've got."

"You still got coffee?"

"Yeah. I just made some. And we have some fountain soda too, though I'm not sure which ones...Mountain Dew and Pepsi are out."

"Help yourselves," he said to me and Sam, "I'll go get the gas."

"Ya need to pay in here first. The pay at the pump ain't working. No one's taking credit or debit. It's cash only."

Bernard looked at him with a funny expression and stood there by the glass door tapping his foot, his hand on the door. He seemed to know something and it made him sad.

He walked up to the counter and took out his wallet. "Go on," he said to us. "Get something."

He gave the clerk a hundred dollars. He didn't get any change back.

They were out of the big drink cups so Sam and I took the largest coffee cups, twenty-four ounces, and filled them with soda and a little bit of ice. She got a root beer and I got that too when I tried a few others that were empty. Bernard came back in and grabbed a coffee cup and filled it. He was moving slowly and I couldn't tell if that was because he was wearing down or because he was deep in thought. Maybe it was a little of both. Either way, Sam looked worried about him again.

When we got to the counter the clerk rang up our drinks.

"Ten bucks?" Sam exclaimed in shock. "This guy's robbing us."

"No, he's not," Bernard said as he paid the man, who was looking a bit sheepish after Sam said that. He had probably been taking some grief from customers in the last few days. "He's charging us what things cost him, Sam."

The man gave Bernard a relieved, thankful look.

"What are you gonna do when you're out of everything?" Bernard asked him as the man closed the register.

"Stay home, I guess," he said with a shrug of his skinny shoulders. "Where you folks going? I haven't seen you before."

"We're going to Tampa to see a game."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"It's baseball," Bernard replied.

“Suit yourself.”

When we got back in the car, Sam turned the key but sat there thinking. “Maybe we should go home, Tuck.”

“Nonsense, honey. We’ve got plenty of gas so long as you drive her nice and easy the rest of the way. Just do fifty-five, okay? And if we see another gas station that looks good before we hit Tampa, we’ll top off again.”

“What’s happening, Tuck?” I’d seen Sam look upset and sad before, but there was genuine fear in her eyes now.

“Don’t worry about it, honey. Let’s just go watch a ballgame and have some fun. That’s all I wanna do right now, okay. I know you’re worried. It’ll be okay. It’ll be fine. I just wanna go to a game with you one more time just like when you were younger.”

“You used to go to games a lot?” I asked.

“The Florida State League, dude. And Spring Training too,” she said. Then she looked long at Bernard, sighed and smiled. “Okay...okay...you’re right. Let’s go. Let’s go see a game.”

You could tell she knew it would be their last one together.

CHAPTER 18

TRAFFIC PICKED up as we neared Tampa. Never having been there before, I didn't have anything to compare it to but it looked a little sparse for a weekday but at least it was busy. The long empty stretches of rural country behind us had grown slightly eerie and I started to get the impression that we'd driven into a real-life horror flick. When things are like that everything looks different and your senses focus in a way that's impossible during normal times. Abe had told me about the immediate aftermath of the Trade Centers coming down and how it was a Tuesday and there was no traffic - everyone was home. He said that night was the weirdest night of his life. It was the quiet, the empty freeways, the stopping of normal life, and the specter of more terror to come, that made all of life move in slow, wide-eyed rhythms he'd never experienced in his past. It wasn't like a boxing match where you have similar nerves, he explained, because for the one you had your discipline and training which prepared you to meet the future. For the other, though, for that lonesome, uncertain night in

2001, there was no knowledge of what was to come. You felt vulnerable.

Abe hated feeling vulnerable.

As we reached the city, from the highway I could see neighborhoods with old cars parked in front of small houses on narrow streets. These weren't rich neighborhoods. They were similar to the area that I knew up north so I recognized them in that way that one who has come from them knows them. The houses weren't as close to each other as they were back in New York and they didn't have that beaten down look that the harsh winters clothe them in, but they were nevertheless poor. This was Sunshine State poor and I laughed at the notion that the multi-colored houses looked a wee bit happier than the drab, cold ones from my old hometown.

There were lots of people walking around on the sidewalks and even in the streets as we passed from the elevated highway. Again, I had no idea whether this was normal or not. It would have been easier if we were driving in Asheville. There I could tell instantly if there was something amiss. To be heading into potential turmoil in a strange place only served to make it all the more surreal to me.

Once we got off the freeway we passed several gas stations that either had a line wrapped around the corner, waiting for a pump, or a sign that said they were as gas-free as a stone. The prices for the gas were wild; one station was six bucks a gallon and another across the street was nearly ten. The cheaper one was out, though, so maybe they hadn't gotten a new supply at the higher price. I tried again

to ask Bernard what was going on but he didn't want to talk about it and said only, "Well, commodities rise when there's turbulence like this. Of course, the price could come back down when demand dries up...that depends on what's happening with the currency, though. Right now, our currency is in the toilet. Oil is a real thing that people need. Food is too. Stuff like that can't get manipulated like currency. Screw around long enough with your money and debt and this is what you get."

"Huh?"

"Don't worry about it, kid. There's nothing you can really do about any of it if you haven't already done something. The forces at work are a lot bigger than any one of us."

"Well, that's just delightful," I replied. "You have a heck of a way of making a guy feel better."

He laughed and told me there had been a time to worry, plan, and prepare and that time had passed. Now, he said, was a time to enjoy watching the spectacle unfold. That was all the information I could get out of him, though it was painfully clear he had quite a bit more to give. He turned around and gave me a look that said, basically, "Drop it," so I did for the next little while.

He and Sam were having a delightful conversation about previous games they'd been to and the precious memories amassed from them. The conversation continued all the way to the stadium and they were walking and talking in the nearly empty parking lot, arm in arm, as carefree and delighted as can be, apparently having forgotten the previous trepidations.

"There's no one here," I said, taking careful and worried notice that there were maybe twenty cars in a parking lot designed to hold thousands.

"There's never anyone here," Bernard replied, shrugging off my worry. "They all come for Spring Training games when the Yankees are here, but these games are lucky to draw a thousand people."

We walked by a mini-monument park - a shrine for the great Yankees of the past, of which there were so many, and then up a flight of stairs. The stadium towered in front of us, impressively, I thought, for a minor league stadium but, then again, it was the Yankees Spring Training home, so you got the pleasure of the reverence and majesty of a big league park without the inconvenience of the crowd and absurd prices.

"Do you remember playing Wiffle Ball over there?" Sam motioned to a grassy area on our right as we walked, her voice again song-like, full of happiness, devoid of the perturbations that were making me so nervous as to walk along expecting Ninjas or Zombies to jump out from behind every palm tree.

"Yeah. We were waiting for the game to start...oh, and yeah, it's closed again," Bernard looked over at the back entrance of the team store. "Why don't you have your team store open during game times? That's just stupid."

"Is that what it was?"

"Yeah. We drove down to go to the store, which closed at five or six...I don't remember...and then we killed time by playing for a while."

"I remember you sweating like a pig. You were wearing slacks. You never wear shorts."

"I have funny knees."

So, they're laughing and talking and strolling along and I'm thinking that the whole world might be falling apart. I was a few steps behind them, looking left and right, up and down, and trying to see past the tops of the trees that rimmed the property to see if chaos was breaking out and the zombies were coming. All of the concessions were open and, lo and behold, they were reasonably priced - if, in fact, you think that paying six bucks for a bad hamburger was in any way reasonable. We grabbed some food and drinks and went to our seats, which were right behind home plate. There was a sea of empty blue seats stretched out on both sides and behind us. A mother and her three kids, two girls and a boy, were sitting in the next section and they were the closest of some scattered clusters of people. All the empty seats spooked me. Bernard reminded me that such low attendance wasn't unusual and, besides, he went on, the stadium was so large that it made it look emptier than it was for a minor league game of A-level ball.

Finally, he said to me, "If you don't get a grip, I'm gonna make you wait in the car, so suck it up, Princess."

I ate my hamburger and chips in silence.

As the game started the sounds of baseball snapped me out of my black thoughts. The ball thudding powerfully into the catcher's mitt, the ump calling a strike, and that brilliant sound of the bat connecting with the whizzing, diving, cutting, curving, splitting and breaking hardball. If I had just watched and enjoyed I probably would have been

okay but I took my phone out and started reading up on what was going on. This was the one sure benefit of being at a sporting event sparsely attended: the internet wasn't going to be slow.

The Tampa team quickly fell behind and by the time the sun had set and the stadium lights were on, they were in an 8-0 hole. I was half paying attention by then and was reading the local news reports of growing unrest in the cities - especially in Tampa - in the wake of economic upheaval. This presented two problems for me.

The first was that I had no idea what some of this stuff meant, so I'm reading things about Wall Street, stocks, bonds, derivatives, put options, the Fed and monetary policy, inflation, housing costs, wages, unemployment, the dollar, bank reserves here and abroad, and...well, I wasn't making sense out of any of it. The major thing I took from all my reading was that the news was bad and no one that knows such things knew how much worse it would get.

My second issue was that I also didn't know where to go to get news that was credible. That's the danger of the internet, I suppose. Guys like me, never having put a smidgen of mental effort into economic matters and politics before, suddenly are thrust into a great, turbulent sea of information coming at us from disparate sources and there's no way to know whom to trust. For the idiots and the blissfully ignorant alike there is no difference from not being able to know the truth because no one will tell you and being too ill-informed to discern the times.

The Tampa team began a comeback after the visiting team hit the grand-slam that made it 8-0. They started off

their part of the inning with back-to-back doubles, then a walk, and a towering moon shot of a homer, All of a sudden it was a game again, not a slaughter. The crowd actually made some noise and there was a good positive energy to the place all of a sudden, inspired by the possibility of witnessing with our own eyes a comeback of such proportions. Even the police officer standing at the top of the concourse pumped his fist when the ball cleared the fence and the lead had been cut in half.

“Holy cow, Charlie,” Bernard barked at me, “you’re looking at that cop so much I have half a mind to think you’re in love with him.”

“Just wanna see if he...well...”

“Runs for his life?”

I rolled my eyes.

“What are you expecting, kid? The Zombie invasion?”

How’d he guess? I shrugged. “I dunno...I’m just nervous. The news sites say that there’s been violence and protests.”

“Yeah...people are pissed off about the gas and the prices at the stores. Do you see any bread aisles out there, Charlie? Any gas pumps? No. No. No one’s coming to riot at a baseball game, kid. Just relax.”

I sighed and tried to let the tension out of my shoulders, which felt like I'd been giving the crazy pie-lady a piggy-back all day. Next, trying to find an outlet for my nervous energy, I sent a text to Abe to tell him we were doing fine. It wouldn't go through.

“I mean...you’re driving me crazy. You’re quite a neurotic little fella.”

In the bottom of the ninth Tampa rallied for four more runs and tied the game and, for the time being, even I was able to forget myself and got wrapped up in the drama of the game and was standing and cheering when a clutch opposite field single scored the last two runs that tied it. The batter had started in an 0-2 hole, battled his way back into the count, and avoided a strike out that would have ended the game by fouling off several pitches into the parking lot and adjacent fields. Finally, in the tenth pitch of his at-bat, he reached out, protecting the outside corner of the plate, and shot the ball between first and second base. There had been runners on second and third and the throw in from right field was close, so close, but the guy was safe - we had a great view of it from our seats.

Excited as I was, when the inning ended without a winning run being scored, and we headed into extra innings, I started getting nervous again. The game had already been moving slow as it was. At the end of the ninth it was close to eleven o'clock. Bernard had gotten up during the seventh inning stretch and went to the bathroom. After he left, Sam and I decided we wanted ice cream. When we came around the corner onto the concourse, Bernard was standing over a drinking fountain and taking a pill. He saw us and said simply, "I'm thirsty." We all returned to our seats with double scoops of Moose Tracks. As we ate I looked over at him and wondered what kind of pain he was in. He wasn't the type that was going to talk about it and make you feel sympathy for him. I admired that, admired him, and sat licking my ice cream, which was melting quickly in the warm, sticky night, and thought of how

incredible it was for a man to be dying like he was dying - eating ice cream, watching baseball, and driving his muscle car around the state with his beloved granddaughter. And I thought of why he was irritated with me for my attitude. There I was, young, my brother just having won all that money, and I was afraid of gas prices being high and potential riots. He was dying. He had only days left on the earth and yet he faced it with nary a hint of self-pity.

In the top of the eleventh the visitors got their lead-off man on via walk. When he went to steal second, the catcher threw the ball clear into center field and the runner advanced to third. I watched the catcher snap his mask back over his helmet in disgust. The go-ahead run now ninety feet away, he couldn't allow a ball past him and yet the situation was his doing - his error.

The next batter struck out. After him was the guy that had hit the grand slam way back in the early innings. Well, he smoked one high to centerfield. The runner at third watched, waited, waited, and when the ball was caught, he tore home. The throw was a laser and the catcher tagged him out to complete the double play - inning over, disaster averted, and redemption for the catcher on a great catch and tag.

The game concluded when Tampa was up in the bottom of the twelfth. They hadn't had a man on base since their rally in the ninth and it looked very much like their bats had gone utterly cold until - whack - their first baseman hit a shot in the left field gap. He settled for a double and scored the winning run when the next batter doubled to the other side of the park. Game over. Final score nine-to-eight. It

was exactly midnight and a full moon shone down upon the team as they celebrated on the field.

I was careful not to say anything that would upset Bernard. He and Sam were in such good moods and were talking jubilantly about the game, especially the play at the plate in the eleventh and how that saved the game for Tampa. It was wonderful that they had a relationship like that. I had a great relationship with Abe, of course, but he wasn't the type that you'd walk along with, arms entwined, laughing and reminiscing, so it was all very odd and wonderful to behold.

As we exited there were two police officers and stadium workers at the gate.

"You want to be careful heading home tonight," the one officer, who I hadn't seen before, said. "There's some activity throughout the city. Avoid local roads when you can."

"We're heading northbound - back up the Suncoast Parkway," Bernard said.

The officer shook his head and thought for a bit. "Nah. I'd stay on the interstate if I were you. Get back on I-4 and take 275 north. I wouldn't risk 60. There's been no trouble on the interstate. It's longer but safer."

"Is it safe getting to the interstate?" I asked.

The officer shrugged and made a face. "Go out...take a right...go straight to the highway. Don't stop for anything. If you're at a red light and can proceed safely, just go through it. Don't stop for gas, food...nothing. Just get to the interstate and go. That's my advice."

We walked back to the car and Bernard took the keys and opened the trunk, pulled out a green duffel bag that looked like he'd had it since the Marine Corps, and then we all got in our seats. He had the bag across his lap, sitting in the passenger seat as before, and asked Sam if she was okay to drive. She said she was. He unzipped the bag, looked around the parking lot, and then pulled out two shotguns.

"This is loaded," he said as he handed me one in the backseat. "It's an 870 youth model...twenty gauge. I figured that you'd never shot before, right?"

"I shoot my mouth off just fine."

He laughed. "That's the spirit. Make jokes. Stay relaxed. All ya have to do is aim, fire, pump, repeat. Ya hear me? Forget that nonsense about not having to aim a shotgun."

I must have been looking at him with a sense of abject befuddlement because suddenly he looked irritated, took my gun back, and told Sam to get going. He emptied the shells from the gun and showed me how to use it. He was turned around in his seat and pointing the gun towards the back window, pumped it, pulled the trigger and I heard a click, he pumped again, click, and handed me the gun again.

"See? Just like that," he said. "Practice that for a few minutes. Aim it there, damn it. Don't ever point it at us. Man!"

"Sorry. It's not loaded, right?"

He shook his head in disgust and checked the other weapon, which he said was a Mossy twelve-gauge. "It

doesn't look Mossy to me," I joked and he shook his head and kept working on it.

Pumping and clicking and feeling like an idiot, I said, "You carry an arsenal with you wherever you go?"

"Arsenal?" He laughed. "I always have a gun or two, kid. But your brother...that guy's got an arsenal."

"Huh?"

He laughed as we pulled onto the empty highway in front of the stadium. All looked clear and there was a green light ahead of us in the distance.

I was fiddling around with the gun and looking around with measured trepidation, eyeballing the dark, relieved that we were armed even though I hoped desperately that there wouldn't be any reason to use our weapons. We passed through one intersection and there was a small crowd around a fast food place on the corner but the light was green and we cruised through. At the next one was where the trouble started. A crowd of people had spilled onto the roadway from a shopping plaza to our right and traffic was gnarled and not getting through. Sam slowed as we approached.

"You'd think there'd be cops out here," Sam said as she rolled to a stop maybe 100 yards from the melee. People were standing in the road, waving their arms, hollering and screaming - at what I couldn't tell. In the parking lot where there were shops and restaurants things were markedly worse. People were smashing things and it looked like a car or two or three might be on fire.

"Call your brother quick and tell him what's going on," Bernard said as he grabbed my gun and started to load it.

A car drove around us as I dialed and it may have been someone from the game but I couldn't tell. They approached the intersection slowly and started to honk their horn as they approached. My phone call went right to voicemail.

"Abe...this is Charlie. Listen, man, I dunno if you have your phone off or what's up but, listen...we're trying to get out of Tampa right now and it's not looking good. The games over...Tampa won...it was a great comeback. Listen...I dunno why I told you that but, I mean, I'm nervous. We're kind of stuck here and there's a bunch of hooligans blocking the road and they're busting up a shopping plaza and burning things and we can't get through. I, I guess I just wanted to touch base with you. Bernard told me to call while he loaded my shotgun. I mean, it's not my shotgun. He brought a few with him because he's...well, Bernard and he carries guns with him in his trunk apparently and thank God for that. Okay...okay...I'm gonna go now. Bernard's done loading and he's looking at me like I'm an idiot so I guess I'll just go. Call me when you can."

"You're a funny kid," he said and handed me the gun.

"I'm quietly freaking out, thank you."

"Quietly is good. Now, listen, that's all buckshot. There's no slugs in there."

"I'm not sure what that means."

He laughed and said not to worry. "Just don't shoot us in the back of the head, okay?"

"Do you think I'm gonna have to use this, sir?"

He surveyed the scene and sighed dismally. Right at that moment, as the car that passed us honked again and tried to pass through the mob, a group of people started to pound on it and they were screaming and yelling. It was too dark to see who was in the vehicle from where we were and then the whole car was surrounded. I never did look to see what kind of car it was but it looked like a Camry or something like it. Suddenly, Sam flinched violently and gasped - I thought I heard a gunshot but wasn't sure.

"Was that gunfire?"

"No," Bernard said. "They broke the windows."

Sure enough, right after that I saw them scrambling and yanking on the occupants from both sides.

"Fire a warning shot?" Sam asked.

Bernard shook his head. "No. Not a good idea. There's likely to be some people up there with guns too. It's best not to draw that kind of attention."

"What do we do? We don't have the gas to sit here and idle forever."

Bernard leaned over and looked at the gauge. It was a little less than half.

"Well?"

"We're a little over a quarter mile to the interstate from here," he said and patted the shotgun as he spoke. "If we turn back we're likely to hit some other problem. We got plenty of ammo to hold people off for a night if we wanna hunker down."

"Hunker down?" I didn't like that one bit.

"We can turn back and try and park in the stadium parking lot for the night. Sleep in the car. One of us keeps

watch. Should be fine.”

“What’s Plan B?” Sam asked.

“Plan B,” Bernard said with a sideways smile, “is you putting this thing in gear, flooring it, and driving straight through that mob. There’s that one car there but you can go through in a straight shot if you’re moving fast enough.”

“They’re beating the hell out of those guys,” I said.

They were stomping and punching on them. Watching it, my stomach tightened into a nauseating knot.

“What if they won’t get out of the way?” She said with an odd sweetness that didn’t match the nature of her inquiry.

“Make sure you’re going as fast as you can. This is a hemi, honey. We’ll hit seventy by the time we reach em. It’ll be like big bugs on the windshield.”

“That’s a pleasant thought,” I opined.

At this moment, in the dark and the chaos, I noticed people coming up from our right side. They were spilling into the roadway from the plaza, men and women, many teenagers, black and white. I saw people waving a strange flag - all black and with a weird fist thing in the middle that was in red and white. Someone was carrying it like it was a war banner and they were marching onward in battle. And I noticed the faces of all the rabble - hard, frenzied with bitterness and rage unleashed, and anger at a world they didn’t understand. This was the vengeance of confusion and despair unleashed upon the society that forgot them, didn’t teach them, didn’t lead them. Many of the young men wore loose fitting jeans precariously held to their slender waists and sagging toward their crotches and they had no shirts

on. They were lean, muscular, dripping with the sweat of anarchy.

"Tuck! Tuck!" Sam was yelling as the noise got louder and they drew closer.

"I see 'em."

"No...behind us too."

I swung around and saw more from our rear, advancing like a deadly wave in the darkness, rolling past the other idling cars stacked behind us. Suddenly we were trapped in a scene we'd only before witnessed on TV, in other countries, foreign lands of ill-repute, lawlessness and great poverty. And so we sat in a classic car, restored to the glory of a time before America had lost its way, and were about to be engulfed by a mob marching to an unknown flag that seemed fit for a child having a tantrum, breaking everything in his path, not knowing or caring about the worth of those things destroyed.

Bernard yelled for Sam to drive but she hesitated and in that moment of indecision, as she wondered about the morality and rightness of running down people in the street, the swarm was upon us and we felt the first wave of mayhem shake the car. They were ahead of us in that feedback loop of violence where a man sees a thing, figures out what it means, decides a course of action and then takes action. They knew their course and were unburdened with the nuances of ethics. We were sitting in a world that didn't exist anymore, our car a sort of time warp where we were considering actions according to a code that was gone. In that vacuum, we were overrun.

I heard a blast out in the distance, like a shotgun maybe, and it came from the intersection ahead and then I heard an engine roar.

It was impossible to apprehend what was going on. Hands were hitting the car and bodies were blocking my view. There was so much noise and clamor and invective popping in the air that I was frozen. I heard another boom and everything went suddenly soundless, like the volume of my good ear, which didn't need a hearing aid, had gone down. I looked and saw that Bernard was leaning back in his seat and had fired his shotgun. That's what probably deafened me. He was struggling with a million arms that had reached in and were grappling for his weapon and he couldn't get off another shot.

I wheeled around to try and shoot but the barrel hit Sam's seat and the sudden jerk caused the gun to fire. I must have had my finger too tight on the trigger. It unloaded buckshot into the seat and the door. I screamed for Sam and was trying to see her. My heart - that had been racing and pounding as never before in my life - was stopped. I couldn't feel anything. Did I shoot her? Did I?

People began pulling at my gun and they had the doors open on both sides. Sam was covering her head with both arms, like a boxer against the ropes and the mob was yanking at her and at my gun. I wanted to let my gun go and see if she was okay but I was too afraid and fought for the weapon and kept yelling for her.

"Did I shoot you?" I was yelling. "Sam! Are you okay?"

She was yelling something back but I couldn't make it out. I started looking around. Bernard was leaning back,

kicking and cussing at his attackers. They were nearly on top of him and were throwing punches that he was dodging while laughing at them in the process. He head-butted a guy in the face and laughed maniacally. "Gettin' your ass whipped by an old guy, boy." He'd lost his mind. I didn't see blood on Sam and that helped me to start focusing and I could breathe easier again.

Someone was trying to pull Sam by the hair and drag her out but she was fighting back, punching, slapping and clawing. I heard a large engine in front of us and looked to see tall headlights glaring in the windshield. It looked for a moment like we were going to be hit head-on and then the vehicle turned at the last instant. It stopped suddenly, a large black pick-up truck and it had one of those flags flying triumphantly from the passenger window. The mob kept pulling at my gun and at Sam. We were all fighting like crazy. I was able to pull the gun away from prying, desperate hands and threw it to the floor beneath me. My hands free, I started to swing my best punches at whatever target presented itself.

Then, it happened. Sam was yanked out by her hair. Instead of being scared and frozen by fear, I was enraged, so, fueled by indignation, I shot out after her - leaving the gun on the floor.

I got out right as I saw her yanked to the ground. I came out in a crouch in order to get my feet set. Someone set upon me right away, was taller and swinging wildly. I answered his attack by burying my head in his chest and throwing uppercuts at his village people and bladder. He went down in a hurry.

That was the first fight I ever won.

But there were too many people and soon I was swinging and pushing and getting hit from every direction. Sam was still on the ground and I couldn't get to her. I heard another boom from a shotgun nearby and right after that a voice yelling she's mine, she's mine.

I was fighting and praying at once. It was all futile. My lungs were burning and I was having trouble breathing. There was no way I was going to last long enough to save her. Men had her down on the hard, dark pavement and were doing only God knows what to her. The thought of their violent hands touching her and taking liberties their character and honor could never earn by consent, would have enraged me further except that it was all becoming so very hopeless. I was holding my own but I couldn't break through. The most precious thing in the world was being trampled and violated by savages and there was nothing I could do. Fury and despair gripped me and I was yelling in my agony as I fought. Yes, I was yelling and punching but it was all hopeless. The vision of her rowing to me on that first night, nature giving us a sunset and, later, perfect moonlight, was before me as I swung angry fists at other young men who had lost their souls somewhere, somehow. Great tears of loss and anguish streamed from my eyes as I fought a thousand Troy's, here to steal my jewel once again. I fought this time. I fought. They were winning. I couldn't defeat them - couldn't stop them from stealing her and her innocence away, or protect her from the darkness that is man's savagery unleashed upon a world that has forsaken law because it has eschewed what is moral. I swung at a

million demons set free from their cages by a world that told them they could do whatever was right in their own eyes. I didn't know what their flag stood for but it was clear that me, Sam and Bernard were their enemies.

A strange sound reached me as I was in a struggle with a young, skinny black guy just a few yards from where Sam was fighting a man on top of her. My arms were locked with my assailant like we were two linemen in a football game with an occasional punch thrown here and there. He was taller and stronger but I was hanging on, trying to push forward, and was deftly dodging his most fearsome haymakers, rolling out of the way at the last second, though I was struck several times on the side of the head. But boxing had taught me how to keep my chin down, so I was never caught flush.

That strange sound continued above the chaos, a weird metallic type sound. I figured that they were hitting the car with bats or crowbars, perhaps. The sound was eerie and had a strange, vicious rhythm to it.

Someone grabbed me around the waist and started to pull me backwards. Between this and the guy in front of me, I lost my balance and fell back to the car. My foe started swinging hellish shots at me and they were beginning to break through. Sam had one arm pinned while another guy was working on the other arm. A third man was on top of her. I had no idea where Bernard was.

Was this how someone like Sam was to be treated in this world? There she was, helpless and at the mercy of the vileness, evil, lust and hatred in the world. What could she have done to have caused these men to treat her like that?

What did she represent to them except a thing their power could exploit? How is it that the strong could see the weak as something to be pinned to a savage highway and raped? What type of men are these and how long have they been in America? Have they been here all along - working, playing, living in the open and yet harboring such wicked, anarchic passions that merely needed the strike of a match to bring them to open, consuming flame? Was this the blackness that really is our world and the heart of man? Is civilization the anomaly? Is that which is soft, peaceful, and precious in its wondrous vulnerability exactly that which is lost when appetites aren't restrained?

I was about out of it when that crack was heard again, this time closer to me than before. I was pinned back against the rocking Dodge, which was being jostled every which way in the tumult and savagery when the guy in front of me was hit from behind. His head snapped to the side and I figured, in the confusion and speed of it, that he must have been shot except that I heard no report. His body sagged instantly. He was a rag doll, all was limp and he fell lifeless to the pavement where a man like that - who brings violence to the vulnerable - absolutely belongs. I figured he was dead.

As he fell, I saw Abe.

Abe had punched him in the back of the head.

Swiftly, and before the guy in front of me had completed his dive, Abe closed the gap and smashed the guy that was grabbing at me from the side. There it was again...that crack! I looked closely and saw it. He had brass knuckles. He brought with him a weapon that made his primary skill

even deadlier. I was impressed by the simple genius of it. Those knuckles wouldn't run out of ammo, wouldn't jam, and wouldn't cause a friendly fire incident like I'd almost caused moments ago. In time of stress, when all is riding on action, a man must choose a weapon that he's familiar with and that he can count on. What better choice is there for Abe than his fearsome fists? With them there is no adjustment for distance or timing, for they've been refined by the fires of the ring; no adjustments are necessary, this new weapon is the improved previous one...his fists are now unbreakable and yet they break everything they touch. Most chilling for his enemies is that Abe is as fast as a bullet fired from a gun is faster than a man throwing a shot-put. And speed kills.

My other enemy hadn't fallen yet either before Abe spun back towards Sam. I heard him say, "Let her go." It was said so matter-of-factly but with such martial intent that it sounded indisputable, like God talking. There was no way to argue, would be no way to argue, because the time for arguing was long past. This was the moment for force and the men best prepared for force would rule. That was the meaning of his tone. It was matter-of-fact in this way; if you disagreed with him, you would die. The world had become that simple.

The man on top of her was pulling at her, groping her, hitting her. She was still fighting but her arms were pinned and only her legs were working in defense.

Abe came in low, in a vicious, preternaturally fast crouch powered by perfect legs that performed complex demands of footwork as easily as an average man might stand up

from a chair. He shot in and sent a left hook into the loser's face.

The man's head nearly came off his shoulders.

You may possibly suspect that this is exaggeration but I assure you it's not. Great hitters in boxing are the rarest of specimens. Men of skill that can dispatch other professional warriors with single blows are not common. We think of Dempsey, or Louis, or Marciano, or Tyson; men of such inconceivable power that one strike from them would render other pros unconscious as if they hit them with a bat. This is the type of hitter that Abe was and, to make it all the more worse, the man he struck was not a fighter and was certainly not prepared right then for a hit of any sort, much less one from the hands of Abe Johnson wearing brass knuckles.

The man's head snapped back with such violent suddenness that his body had no time to react. I can't be sure but I'm fairly certain I heard a crack. Perhaps it was his neck; maybe it was the crushing of facial bones - or both. Either way, one second he was having his way with Sam and the next he was slumped to the side of her, lifeless and broken. Good.

The guy nearest Abe, that had been holding her right arm down, quickly stood up. He was in awe of what he just saw and was trying to make sense of it. It didn't compute - you could see that in his eyes. I think he was going to say something but Abe's fury pivoted quickly to him. Before he could react, a straight right, left hook combo crashed into him. The right hand smashed his eye socket to pieces and

the left hook - as if it were needed at all - hit him in the temple.

He fell to the ground. He had to be dead.

The last man started to run but Abe shot forward, another right hand bomb leading the way, his body shot forward by the spring of his rear foot - the piston of his whole fighting machine - and the right hand snapped out, propelled by all that body weight, and cracked the guy in the skull. He went down too and lay there utterly devoid of movement. His face first swoon certainly didn't help his cause.

I heard another gun blast from the other side of the car right as another frenzied rioter grabbed me and threw me out of the way so that he could get in the Charger. I lost my balance but didn't fall. Emboldened by Abe and his presence, I tore into him and landed a right hand to the head and a short hook to the body. The body shot dropped him nicely, thank you.

I've heard that martial artists often decry boxing - saying that it isn't suited for street fighting. Well, let me tell you from this experience (and other fights I've seen in the street) that people are throwing punches and in whatever universe that people throw punches, boxing is absolutely the king.

Abe pulled Sam to her feet and she was clutching him passionately. He got her behind him and she was holding his long, loose athletic shirt. "C'mon, Charlie," he yelled. I reached into the car and grabbed the shotgun from the floor. I was relieved that it was still there. I joined them in the street after that. Sam walked between us, holding the

tails of both of our shirts. I faced the opposite direction, covering where we had just been and was guided by her tugging. We passed around the front of the car and then I realized that we were getting into that big truck that had parked in front of us. It was Abe's truck.

He got Sam in the back seat and told me to get in behind her. He slammed the door shut behind me and hit the auto lock on the front passenger door and then shut that too. He went off a few feet and was yelling something I couldn't hear, which is when I realized that I'd lost my hearing aid somewhere in the melee. Sam was talking to me but I realized it late because she was on my bad side. I looked at her and shook my head, pointed to my ear and said, "I lost it."

"Where?"

"I dunno...fighting somewhere, I guess."

She didn't say anything and we sat there in silence, panting, sweating, and taking inventory of our wounds while trying to see where Abe went.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

She nodded but she was crying - more from overexcitement and shock, it would seem; she looked like she was irritated with herself for crying and wiped at her tears impatiently.

"You're good? They didn't...? Weren't able to...?"

She shook her head. "No, Charlie."

That gave me a great and resounding relief and I looked at her, brushed her hair off her forehead, which was scraped, bleeding, and starting to swell. I felt like crying and began to feel real scared again. In disgust, sick of being

scared, sick of being prey for the vicissitudes of life, I started to get out of the truck. She put a hand on my arm and asked where I was going.

“To help find Bernard.”

Right as I said this the lights of the truck flashed and the doors unlocked automatically. Abe - or someone - had hit the remote. I raised the gun and looked. Abe was coming and he was half dragging Bernard. Amish Mike was behind him with a shotgun, which was scaring off would-be aggressors. I threw the door open and jumped out. The sounds of chaos rushed me. Bernard was bloodied, had a weary arm around Abe’s shoulders, and was dragging his feet as they hurried to the truck. When they got to the back door, Abe lifted him up and put him in so swiftly that it almost looked like he threw him. Then I heard Bernard complaining.

“Damn jackasses! Thought they’d just whup an old man! Ah! Ah! Sam! You’re good? Are you good, honey? Are you? Oh, you’re okay! You’re okay...oh...” he buried his head in her thankful, euphoric embrace.

Abe ran around and jumped in the driver’s seat and Amish Mike got in on the passenger side, careful to keep the black flag hanging, which was suspended from his window.

“Hold on,” I said, and darted back into the crowd before they had a chance to stop me. I moved fast, my shotgun providing security as I dodged around a few martial revelers and got back to the Charger. There was a guy in the driver’s seat, all hot, sweaty, shirtless, and wild looking.

He was probably my age. I'm pretty sure that was the only thing we had in common.

He was rifling through the glove compartment. The interior light was on and since he was leaning over the center to reach the other side of the car, he didn't have any weight on the back of his seat so I reached down and pushed it forward like I was getting in. He looked up at me and started swearing. I pointed the barrel at him and glared.

"I'm looking for something," I said and I'm pretty sure I sounded rather menacing at that moment although there is no way to be certain of that. Even if I sounded like Mickey Mouse, the dark barrel of a shotgun more than makes up for what I might lack in other bonafides. Mike Tyson was once asked if he tried to intimidate people before a fight. He replied, "I intimidate people by hitting them." That was early in Tyson's career, of course - when he was still a defensive wizard, a perpetual motion machine of head movement, that ripping, pounding jab and all those furiously fast combinations. Well, I understood his point. I didn't need to look like Tyson. I intimidated people now by being able to shoot them.

It was a cool feeling.

Anyway, the guy let me know that he didn't want to mess with no buckshot and happily slid himself out the passenger side. I searched the backseat and then found what I was looking for: my hearing aid. It was in the corner of the seat and when I reached in with my right hand, holding the gun with my left, I was able to grab hold of the ear mold but the top of the aid was snagged between the seat and the door

so I had to be careful with it and gently lift it out. I kept looking around. People were everywhere. The street had grown so crowded at some points that people could barely move.

Well, I got the aid out and it looked to be in working order. It must have fallen out of my ear when everyone began pulling at me. It was a small miracle it wasn't smashed. Had it fallen in the road it would have obviously been trampled a thousand times over.

I turned away from the car, placed the gun under my arm and worked the aid back into my ear. Right as I got it set a guy came around the trunk and was looking at me weird. I turned toward him with the gun and said, "You got something you wanna say?"

"Nice car, man."

"Yeah."

"It's a 69 Charger?"

"Yeah."

"A hemi?"

"This ain't no car show, dude."

He laughed - I mean really laughed and said, "Ya got that right." He walked off with the crowd, laughing and shaking his head as though it was the most natural thing in the world - what was going on - and something that a man can actually laugh at. There were those men fallen around the car, crumpled, wounded, bloodied; fires were burning, windows smashed, and the smell of the gun blasts mingled with all the body odor and smoke. But he walked off like this was all rather natural and I thought that no matter what else happened this night or in the nights to come, and

regardless of what our country was changing into, a guy like that was going to be alright. He was a survivor because he was so very flexible.

I hurried back to the truck. I pushed my way through the crowd and they were all streaming in the other direction now - going across the highway where something new had caught their attention. I saw flashing lights in the distance, over the top of the thousands of heads, a turbulent sea of lawless humanity. The lights were going the other way, though; sirens swirling in the darkness, a vestige of civilization beyond my reach, heading away, going to another battle in this war that we didn't understand. I stood there a moment, the crowd passing me, Abe looking at me from over the top of the truck from where he stood on the running board, a look of bewilderment and worry on his face, and I took it all in. Just days before I had been in that shack on the pleasant, blue water; all had been calm and I was holding the world's most beautiful lady. Tonight I was part of a battle that had spread out from the broken homes of America and taken over her streets. Yes, that's what I was looking at. Whatever the economy was doing was merely an excuse for what I saw all around me - it was the decay of a million families, before in private, now out in the open. Tonight, we all suffered together and all the pain and anguish and meaninglessness that we once bore alone was running over the sides of that cup of civilization and spilling everywhere. I wondered as I held the gun in my hands and felt the power that it gave me, when it was that we reached that critical moment. There have always been broken

homes. What was the percentage it takes to destroy a great land?

That's what I saw. I saw a savage, mindless greed run amok and rage for the sake of rage. I saw thousands depart from civility and law and justice because they no longer believed in those things. I kept looking at the faces of those that were passing - people I would have seen in a convenience store on any given day, buying sodas, getting gas...now they were all a part of an end that marked no new beginning and I wasn't sure if they understood that. They weren't marching against Washington - they weren't going to install anything new. Tomorrow, if one dawned, the new day would simply shine over the destruction of what was; there will be no sun upon a fresh hope, just a light shining onto what was done in darkness. No, there will be nothing from this that was worth the fight.

Abe revved the engine and hit the horn. I ran up and jumped in the back with Bernard and Sam.

We drove slowly toward the interstate, moving in a slow roll through the massive throng. Amish Mike had his window down and was waving that stupid black flag from the window and people hooted and shouted affirmations at him as he passed. If only they knew that he was a corporate attorney and that one of the world's richest men was in the back seat.

"What the hell is that thing anyway?"

"It's supposed to represent the ninety-nine percent," Amish Mike said over his shoulder.

"Is that what that is? A ninety-nine and a fist?"

"I thought it was a club."

"I can't tell what it is."

"I don't think it matters, Charlie."

"What were you doing out there Charlie?" Abe asked irritably as he navigated us into the intersection where the car that had passed us had been blocked, the people had been pulled out and beaten. I couldn't see any of the aftermath of that from the backseat and that was all probably well and good. Those are the kinds of images that can haunt a person for a lifetime.

"I went back to get my hearing aid. It fell off in the car. I got it. It still works."

"Oh. That's good."

"Something tells me that I wouldn't have a chance to get a brand new one anytime soon."

"Is that what you were standing there thinking about when you should have gotten into the damn truck?"

"Sorry." What I didn't say was that I was still mad too and hadn't wanted to stop fighting just yet. The hearing aid was just the latest thing fear had taken from me and I wanted it back. I was sick of being scared and I liked the feeling I had...I liked winning a fight.

"No...no...I'm sorry. I'm glad you're alright, man. I was afraid you were hurt or that you'd lost your mind out there."

"Nah. I'm just a writer."

There was a pause and then everyone started laughing - me included.

"Where'd you get the flag, by the way?"

"We saw it on the news," Amish Mike said. "We were back home and had finished our work - Abe went to rest

and I figured I'd relax and watch the news."

"I don't call that relaxing," Sam said.

"Yeah," he laughed. "Well, they were showing the riots around the big cities and in Tampa too and I saw the flag. It's become a bit of a symbol."

"For what?"

"Anger," Abe said.

"Resentment," Bernard added.

"And alienation," Amish Mike went on. "So as I was watching and saw that Tampa was getting worse and worse as the night went on, I went and woke up your brother."

"I was trying to call and text, man," Abe's voice was tense with worry.

"I just got a few texts a little while ago," I said.

"So, around ten-thirty or so it's clear that Tampa is getting pretty bad and the cops are trying to enforce a curfew here and in St. Pete and then the news tells us that police and first responders aren't able to reach people anymore because they're all tied up with the stuff breaking out. Well, your brother walks back upstairs and brings some of his things out to the truck, then comes back in and tells me he's going."

Abe said, "I couldn't reach you."

"Well, there's no way that I'm not going," Amish Mike said as he turned and looked at his bloodied boss who was slumped down in the middle seat next to me, looking as if all the life was draining from him - and yet he seemed fully satisfied too. It was weird.

"You da man, Mike," Bernard said. "The only lawyer I ever liked."

"There's no way I wouldn't have come."

"I love you, man...even though you left my car."

"Wanna go back and get it?" Abe said.

"Nah. It's no use. It's not like I'll be driving it around anymore."

"Tuck!" Sam smacked his leg.

"Well, it's true, sweetie. I figured this to be my last gallop around the block with her. Looks like I was righter than I thought. But more than that, I got to see my last ballgame and get into a fight too." He laughed so hard he started choking. "I surprised a couple of folks out there tonight."

We approached the interstate and were free of all the violent rabble so we picked up speed. Amish Mike pulled the flag into the truck and closed the window. It looked like it was a black bed sheet that had been cut and made to fit around a bathroom plunger stick.

"Where'd you score that?" Sam asked.

"We pulled off the interstate and saw the crowd," Abe explained as we entered the freeway from the onramp. There was pretty heavy traffic. "I pulled up next to this guy and asked if I could have it, to fly it from the truck and he was more than happy to give it to me. Figured it was easier to, you know, blend in."

CHAPTER 19

WE GOT off the interstate and hooked back towards the coast, heading north into rural Florida, the night slightly alight by the clear, white moon. Spanish moss hung creepily from the trees in the darkened distance and made every meadow look sinister as I rested my head back against the seat. There wasn't much talking after Bernard fell asleep against Sam's shoulder. We rode along in silence. I would say that we were like soldiers coming home from battle but soldiers usually know their enemy and their mission; we didn't know either. In a way, there was a sense that nothing was the same anymore and there was fear that nothing ever could be the same again. I couldn't help wondering what world we were driving back to and if what we'd fought in Tampa was going to follow us.

Abe spotted a gas station that looked open off of highway 19 and pulled in next to the pumps. We all looked around suspiciously but there was nothing that struck us as amiss out there in the quiet and the dark. It was nearly four in the morning anyway and there was only one car parked in the brightly lit lot - which was likely the attendant's.

Abe walked in ahead of us and came back out quick. "There's gas," he said. "I figure we should stay topped off."

We all went in while Abe pumped. I was starving and thirsty and grabbed a handful of snacks and drinks and put them on the counter. Sam, Bernard and Amish Mike did the same thing.

"I'm surprised there's anything here," I said as the attendant looked at us and started scanning our stuff.

He was a young guy with a stocky build and a good natured look about him. He was big too and looked like he could play football if he toned up a bit. He said, "We got a couple of delivery trucks within the past few hours. You guys lucked out. We were sold out of pretty much everything last night. You guys get into a fight?"

We looked at each other and realized we were all sporting welts, bruises and cuts. Bernard had blood all over the corner of his mouth and under his nose.

"Yeah," Bernard replied quickly, like he'd been waiting to be asked, "and you should see the other guys."

"Seriously? Who'd you guys get into with around here?"

"Nah, not here," I said. "We were in Tampa."

"Wow, man. Was it bad?"

I didn't feel like talking about it so as Bernard gave the guy a blow-by-blow and regaled him with his story of fighting off zombie-like attackers with only one good hand, even though he's old and soon to be dead, I took my stuff that had already been scanned and put into a white plastic bag and went out to the truck. Just as I reached the door, I looked back and saw that our combined extravaganza was

over a hundred bucks. What kind of world was this becoming where snacks and drinks cost that much?

"You doing okay, little buddy?" Abe asked as he squeezed a few more drops into the truck and the handle clicked off.

"I'm a little banged up. My head is weird...like I feel dizzy and groggy."

He nodded and put the pump back. "That's how it is after a fight. You're just as tired as death sometimes. You'll be pretty wiped out...maybe for a few days, but after that you'll be fine."

"Oh. Okay."

"Charlie?"

"What?"

"You fought."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I did. I fought. Wow."

"You did good, little brother."

"You saved her."

"We both did."

"She's looking at you weird."

He looked at her watching him as she walked out the convenience store door and into the bright parking lot. I waited for him to say something but he didn't. At times like that I could always tell that he was thinking of something but it was futile to try and get him to talk about it.

We drove up the empty highway, passing signs for Tallahassee. The road was deserted and it all looked normal except that the soundless, dark night was different now. My sense of tranquility was as shattered as the noggins of the poor saps Abe had cracked with his brass knuckles. The stillness and quiet should have been soothing but I was

haunted by a sense that this was a calm like the blue sky that breaks through during a storm - fleeting, and actually a sign that things are more tumultuous than you thought. We stopped at a traffic light but there was no one coming in either direction so Abe rolled through it.

"Thank you," Sam said from the backseat, her voice faint, unsteady.

I saw Abe's eyes in the rearview mirror and shadows from the passing lights moving on his face. "What?"

"I wanted to thank you for all of that back there."

"It's okay. How're you doing? You okay?"

She shrugged uncomfortably and was looking at an old building we were passing, alone in the dark, vacant, and from a time the economy had forgotten. Years ago it was probably a bustling shopping plaza. Now it had weeds through the cracks in the aged pavement and where lit signs used to be welcoming there were broken pieces of metal and empty spaces.

"Do you think that you killed those men?"

"No way to tell. Maybe."

"Does it bother you not to know?"

"It bothered me more what they were doing."

"I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For calling you violent before."

"Oh," I saw his expression in the dim light of the dashboard instruments and he looked perplexed.

"In saying that...I lumped you in with people like that. You're not like that. You fight but that doesn't make you like them. I'm sorry."

Softly, he said, "It's okay."

"Did you want to kill them?"

"I wanted to stop them. I never wanted any of that, Samantha. I didn't have a choice."

"Yes, you did."

"The brass knuckles were a great idea," Amish Mike said while rubbing his eyes wearily.

"Yeah."

"You don't boast about your fights, do you?" Sam asked, leaning against the door, watching his eyes in the mirror.

"I don't see a reason to boast about anything. A man does what he has to do. And a man that's good at boasting isn't good for anything else."

"Ali was good at fighting and boasting," I said.

"Yeah, little bro, but that made him overconfident and he stayed around too long."

"That didn't work out too well," Bernard added.

"Why do you think they were doing that to us?" She asked with a great and sweet sadness to her voice that made me regret the whole thing all the more.

"They ran out into the street," Bernard said in a tired whisper, slurring his words, staring straight ahead into what was coming. "...and we were there. They were excited and we were there. It was as simple as that. As that group took over the road and kept moving on, the ones coming in behind them didn't know that we weren't a part of them."

"But why...?"

"Pep used to tell me that sometimes when a fighter loses he can't admit he wasn't good enough. He can't deal with that truth so he looks for excuses. The other guy was

fouling me, or I had to cut weight, or the judges screwed me, or the ref was interfering. It's all because he can't face the truth that he lost and that another man was better. That's a hard thing to take. A guy that plays on a football team - when his team loses there's all those other guys that share the loss with him. Not so with the fighter. I think it's the same with people. It's hard to admit that your situation is your fault. It's easier to say that it's society's fault or something like that. That's why they did that. They were angry. They don't feel like life has treated them fairly. We got caught up in all that tonight."

"That's very Republican of you, Abe," she said bitterly.

"Call it what you want. Pep said that a man might not have caused the situation he finds himself in but he's always responsible for it. If all of those people had been taught that, do you think that tonight would have happened?"

She never answered and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

CHAPTER 20

WHEN BERNARD DIED, despite the common knowledge that he was dying, I was unprepared for it. It wasn't so much that I hadn't thought about it before the fact, as I assuredly had, it was that his passing struck me far deeper than I had presumed it would. This is probably the case with most deaths. We are never quite prepared for the reality of it.

He was never the same after that night in Tampa. For two days afterwards he appeared tired and deflated. His expressive face, usually dancing with mischief and energy, was rendered plain by the encroachment of the infinite. The boundless energy that always had him tapping a foot, fidgeting, gesturing with his hands or pacing in circles as he spoke, had dissipated and he looked to me like a flat tire. The air had gone from him and even his skin began to sag in ways that suggested that the spirit of the man was passing on, going to the heavens, and escaping the limited, the flesh and the pain. The night before he left us he looked at me and said, "I'm glad I got a chance to meet you, Charlie."

"You're just happy to have finally met Abe."

"No, Charlie. This world needs its poets too; it needs its dreamers. You're strong too - not like Abe, but if we were all like Abe what would there be to fight for? You and Sam... you give men like Abe something to defend. That's a different kind of strength."

This took considerable effort for him. He looked incredibly tired. The nurse had evidently given him something for his pain but the very energy he had in which to stay alive with was limited and simply saying anything taxed that reservoir of life, draining it.

"I've always been a good judge of people, son. You're one of the good ones. Fight to stay that way and fight to remember. It's easy to forget."

Sam stayed with him up in the Pod until he died. I sat with them for most of that final day but was coming back up the stairs when I saw her in the hallway, standing with her face in her hands, her mouth half open, not making a sound that I could hear. She seemed unable to muster up a scream that needed to come out. Abe was in the room with Amish Mike and the old nurse and she was packing up quietly, discreetly. Abe stood on one side of the bed looking down at Bernard's lifeless body, those bruises from the fight forever etched on him, his costume for burial. He still had a fat lip and discoloration around the right eye and scratches on his forehead. And there were bruises all over his arms and shoulders too. If you didn't know any better you would have thought that he died from all those bruises. But it wasn't the case, of course; they were merely present, I thought, to offer him a send off to God - a fitting tribute to show physically the struggles he had endured throughout

his life. Those fists that had struck him left marks he wore gracefully into his parting; he hadn't minded them because they were like badges to him. The deprivations of his early life required beatings that no eye had seen. Like when Abe stepped foot in the ring to do battle - or in the yard last week - he sported a physique that displayed the many days of discipline before that one.

And as I stood in the hallway and saw him lying there, the purple welt on his forehead catching the sun's light, his love of boxing made perfect sense to me. He stretched out like an old champion and everything in his life that he had achieved had come from that iron will of self-denial that is all but lost in today's world. Everyone wants things in an instant. That's what he was saying about the riots. He was a champion of yesteryear - of a time when men sought to work and save and never expected anything from anyone else. To give aid, to give charity is noble; to demand it...well, that was what we saw on that horrible night in Tampa.

When Sam finally looked at me there were no new tears in her eyes, for she had been crying for a while by then and looked exhausted. But she stared at me pleadingly, beseechingly and I pitied her worse than I had pitied myself that night when she kissed me. I offered her my arms and she walked, trance-like, into my embrace. Abe looked at me and there was deep melancholy in his eyes too. Amish Mike was whispering something to him and Abe nodded from time to time but kept looking at me holding her softly in the shadowy hallway.

Later that day, outside on the deck, Joel and Heather were with us and Amish Mike was grilling chicken and steak from the enormous freezer Bernard had kept in the basement. Joel had stayed in a Gainesville hospital for a few days and found it rather funny when he returned to the house to see that we were all bruised up too. When he saw us he said, "What the hell? Were you guys punching yourselves during the fight?"

His face had been hard to look at when I first saw him. His lip was stitched together and his nose was swollen to the point of grotesqueness. He wore sunglasses so I never saw how bad his eyes were. He had no problems with how he looked, though. In fact, he was jovial and relaxed despite looking like a Dr. Frankenstein test case.

He was telling us about their return trip from the hospital, his speech unsteady because his lip was so messed up and he sounded like he'd just come from a dentist that had used a wee bit too much Novocain.

"When we hib the pharbacy there were cobs everybere," he said.

"Yeah," Heather added, "we figured they'd just been robbed. We had no idea about the riots. When I did watch TV in the hospital, it wasn't the news."

"Glad it wasn't like Tampa," I said.

"I'm just glad that we got our prescriptions filled."

"You probably aren't gonna get any refills for a while though."

"Well, I'm pabing mybelf, bube. I fibured the sabe thing, so I haben't taken any since the first bwo days. The pain

hasn't been so bad...it's seeing myself in the mirror that hurts," he joked.

"Maybe I could use some for my leg," Abe said, standing to the side of the grill, alternating between watching the meat cook and looking out at the water.

Joel was laughing and said, "I figured that was gonna nullify your hands - those leg kicks. You took a helluva shot, man."

"One of em almost made me throw up...it made me so nauseous. It wasn't like a body shot."

Joel sat there shaking his head. Sam watched them silently as they joked and talked of the fight as though they were the best of friends. When Amish Mike said that this was exactly what Bernard would have liked to see after the fight, she got up and went inside and came back out with more napkins and plates, which we already had enough of in the first place.

When the food was ready and we were all eating, Amish Mike said, "Listen, I know this is a tough time...especially for you, Sam, but there's some business I need to get straight before we all get going."

"I'm not ready for this," she said and stood up, having barely eaten anything on a plate full of chicken, green beans, and a dinner roll.

"Sam, please. It's about his will and arrangements."

"Tell Charlie."

She walked off to the gazebo and left her food.

Amish Mike looked at me and I shrugged.

"Okay," he said. "Bernard didn't want a funeral here. I've made arrangements for his body to be brought to Orlando

where there will be a small service and then he'll be buried there next to his wife. You guys can attend that if you want to.

"I've been in contact already with Wayne and he's all set, knows what's going on and is as pleasant and supportive as always," he laughed. "Beyond that, you're all set. I guess what I'm saying is that you guys can split whenever you'd like."

At that moment Sam came back up the steps. Her face reddened by frustration and a fury born from her great despair. She looked wild, her beautiful lips trembling with emotion run amok, and those dark eyes were crazy and burning with bitterness. She came up pointing her finger at Abe, and started yelling at him.

"Yeah, that's right - just go. Take your money and go. Take everything he left, everything he worked for and go do whatever it is you want to do in your life. Thanks for using him. Thanks for all you did and for the entertainment of almost killing a man. Yeah...yeah...for that you should be rewarded with all of his money - with everything. Take it! Take it and go."

She was pacing furiously in front of the table as she hammered away at him. I saw Amish Mike start to say something but Abe shushed him and he gave up the thought. Heather looked at her with a dismal sympathy, shaking her head.

"That's all just fine. Thanks so much for coming and doing all you did for him as he died. Thanks for using him."

"Why are you so mad at him?" Heather asked, turning in her chair to face her.

"Why aren't you? Look at your husband! Look at him. Look at what he did to him. And he's gonna walk off with everything. Where does that leave you? You have a baby coming. Maybe you don't mind...maybe you wouldn't have thought anything of doing the same thing had Joel won, but it's not okay. It's not. It's barbaric. It's hateful."

"Samantha," Heather started calmly, like a big sister, "Abe gave us money."

I looked quickly at my brother only to see him close his eyes and sigh.

"What? He did? Oh, how humanitarian of him. How much did he give you of a billion dollars? A million? Two?"

"It's none of your business. Listen, I know that you loved Mr. Tucker...your grandfather. I'm sorry - we're sorry - for your loss. We truly are. But honey, seriously, you've got no right to be judging anyone here - especially Abe. He and my husband knew the risks and they knew the rewards and no one forced your grandfather to do anything he didn't want to do. The whole thing was his idea to start with. So, I know you're grieving, know you're upset...but, seriously, we're fine with the whole thing so you should be too."

"Plus, if I scar over," Joel said with a smile on his butchered mouth, "Heaber doesn't have to be the second best looking perbon in this marriage anymore."

Heather laughed and punched him in the arm. I thought that was rather cute. Sam, however, thought differently, shot them and all of us another stern look and started to storm off to the gazebo again. She stopped at the top of the deck and turned back to look at Abe.

“Did you love him at least?” Her voice was desperate and forlorn and she sounded like someone starving that was asking for a morsel.

“Will you believe what I say?”

She stood there searching his eyes from across the deck.

“I’m not so weak as you think,” she responded as he returned her stare and searched her sweet eyes.

“I know.”

She watched him.

“I did love him. I respected him.”

She stood there for a long moment and looked at him in silence. A strange, hard to read expression on her face as the wind rode through her black hair. Even swept away by so much grief, Samantha was still beautiful, matchless, and all that I could ever think was perfection in a woman. When she smiled at last, and gave him a sad, sad shake of her head, you could see the agony that was in her soul by the way her eyes defied her lips. Those beautiful and bright brown eyes, forever warm and full of song, were now as downcast as the grave itself, as gray and lifeless as a tomb. She stood in the sun and the breeze, which made the leaves behind her bounce and twirl and sway, and she was a perfect picture of contrast - a being of transcendent feminine beauty enveloped by the anguish of death. She was sunshine and shadow; she was song and she was silence.

“Goodbye, Abe. Take care of yourself.”

She nodded to everyone else, then looked at me and her eyes called me to her without a word needing to be spoken. I rose and went with her to the boat.

CHAPTER 21

SAM ROWED us out across the blazing blue water, under the intense Florida sun. She rowed in a fury, which was, be sure, the fury that is born in the heart of the living when they are left defenseless by death. She railed in harsh whispers against Abe and Amish Mike and the whole thing - the fight, the money...all of it was under her stern and comprehensive condemnation. She buried them under an avalanche of indignation as her tanned arms pulled, relaxed, pulled again and drops of sweat formed on them as though a gentle rain were showering upon her alone. I listened closely (for she spoke so softly in order to keep those denunciations between us alone) as the oars pulled us through the water and I knew that this was all just the ravings of the forlorn.

Her anger towards Abe puzzled me somewhat in a way that made me think she wasn't being honest with herself about him. It was either that or else she wanted the money. That possibility, frankly, never quite crossed my mind as a credible alternative, so I watched her as I squinted into the fierce sun and felt sorry for her. That she might secretly be

in love with him, or at least harbor affections for him, wasn't inconceivable in light of all that had happened. He'd saved her life and even if that was an exaggeration, he very certainly rescued her from a lifetime of nightmarish memories. That might easily lead a woman to care greatly for a man - even one she was inclined to dislike. What arguments Abe could make in his defense were made for him by those heartless, lustful paws that were groping at her, clawing and striking her, and trying to take what is only meant to be given in the greatest, most hallowed of free exchanges. Ah, but sex and love are cheap in this world now and she saw for herself what it was that Abe says that he stands fit to fight for. She saw the display of his whole life's goal - which is to defend that which is so easily trampled and taken by heartless hands. What art and beauty we have is without defense in a world where no one knows or cares why art has to be beautiful. If she saw this in Abe, then I could not doubt that she would love him. These vituperations, therefore, were all eruptions of gunfire from a fort soon to fall, crazy shots of protest, wild and random, against the inevitable tide of battle.

We reached the shack and went inside. I saw the new record player, the one from Antique Pie, sitting on the floor where the old one had been. Stunned and confused, I looked at her.

"See? See?" She exclaimed, waving her hand at it and beginning to pace the small floor. I looked around and everything else looked the same as the last time I was there when she kissed me. I would always remember that scene. There was no way for me to forget what the shack looked

like from the door on that night, with the burning light of the setting sun at my back, painting the inside colors of an impossible dream. It had all looked like a world conjured up in a lover's heart and yet it had been there in reality when she was kissing me and her lips were soft and wet and part of mine. It was all just a moment. Life was replete with time, but not with moments like that.

"Where'd you get that?"

"It was here," she said in exasperation. "It was here when I came back. We came back from Tampa and I slept in one of the spare bedrooms at the house. When I was feeling better the next night I rowed out and here it was."

She paced some more and then collapsed to the floor and hugged the big lion to her chest and sat there all curled up like a little girl.

"But who...?"

"You know who. It had to be him."

It must have been him. I stood in silence, thinking.

"What am I supposed to do with that, Charlie? Why did he do that? And then he doesn't say anything about it at all. Why? Does he think that this makes it all better?"

"I don't know what he thinks."

"Did he do this because he likes me...or feels sorry for me?"

I basically repeated my previous sentiment and walked over to put an album on. Once the music started she calmed down a little bit and we spent the last few hours of daylight laying there, talking and listening to the golden sounds just as we had done before the trouble. She spoke of her many irritations with Abe and the way things worked out and she

would cry awful tears of grief whenever she spoke of Bernard, but I was again, I must admit, rather enjoying myself. After all, I was once more there with her. That was all. I was happy. I gave her my shoulder for her head to lean upon. She spoke of her many worries and pains and I listened without comment, without judgment and stroked her hair.

We were laying there in the dark, only a slender light falling on us from the lantern, her head on my chest, when she said suddenly, "I'm not taking any of it."

"Any what?"

"Of this place. I'm leaving it all here, Charlie. When I leave...it'll all stay. I don't have the heart to pack it. It can't come with me anyway. The things in this room belong to this room. I can't bring them to Asheville - or anywhere else. That would be wrong."

"You'll leave the albums?"

"All of it."

It was then that I realized that I couldn't see the bottom of her despair because there wasn't one. There was nothing I could say, nothing I could do, so I hugged her tight and began to cry for her.

We must have been asleep for a while because we were startled half to death when we heard the door slam. Instantly we were in a seated position. At the door, next to the lantern, was her father.

He had a gun in his hand.

He didn't point it at anything. It hung at his side, heavy in his hand, and he was gesturing with it as he spoke. My

heart seized with terror every time the muzzle pointed our way but I hugged her ever tighter.

"I can't tell you how happy I am for you," he said with a bitter, sarcastic tone. "You got everything you wanted somehow. Everything." He paced around but there wasn't much room so, irritated and impatient, he squatted down in the corner next to all the baskets and leaned against the wall, fidgeted like that for a moment and then reluctantly settled into a seated position.

"You have it now, Sam. I've got to commend you. Your mother was saying to me that you're a whole lot smarter than you let on. All this innocence and photography...your whole shtick...it's all pretty convincing but in the end you get your way. Don't you? Well, Pamela was right. You knew how to get what you want. Good for you."

"What are you talking about, Dad?"

He looked at us, studied the puzzlement and fear on our faces and rested the gun in his lap, tapping his thumb on the slide above the trigger guard. With his other hand he scratched his head and drew a weary breath. He looked profoundly confused.

We sat there, dreading what might happen, afraid to look directly at the black weapon in his lap, and waited for him to answer.

Finally he said, "You got what you wanted, Sam."

She shook her head, her expression was pure bafflement.

"The shack. The property. You got it all. Good for you."

I looked at her and felt the air go out of my lungs. Her face went white, even in the dim light of the lantern you

could see it and her mouth hung open, as though she had no comprehension of the words he'd spoken.

"I mean, I always respected you. No matter what your mother said...I always admired your innocence - your intransigence, your will. I can see now that you and your mother are so much alike. I never saw it before. You guys did it, though. You both played it well."

"What the hell are you saying?"

He shouted and his face turned into an awful mask of hatred. "Don't you lie to me, girl. Don't you make it like I'm stupid. Damn you for all these years of judging me. Damn you for treating me like that man did. You and your grandfather - all high and mighty and moral. You liar! You just wanted this place. That was your price. So you and dad hatched this damn scheme. I can't prove it but that's what you did. Don't you dare treat me like an idiot. I swear I'll use this thing if you do."

He pointed the gun at us like he was poking a finger in our face. His finger was inside the guard.

"Bernard left her the property?" I asked, trying to calm him down and make sense of it all.

His eyes, crazy, mad, ready to find offense, darted back and forth between us crazily. "I'm telling you..." he said menacingly.

"What about your lawsuits? Even if he left it all in the will...I thought that didn't matter. Trust me, sir, trust me... Sam doesn't know what you're talking about. Neither of us do. We were just laying here and she was talking about not taking any of this back to Asheville with her when she goes."

Once more a look of confusion overtook his face and the menace and the hatred subsided.

Then, once again, the door opened and there was another guest. It was Abe and he was dripping wet. Later I learned that he'd swam out immediately upon seeing Wayne rowing our way from the other direction. He was still wearing his sneakers but was standing there dripping on the floor, shirtless and wearing dark athletic shorts.

"She doesn't know any of it, Wayne," he said in a low, calm voice despite having to work to catch his breath.

Wayne shot to his feet when he saw him. He raised the gun a little but didn't have it leveled at him fully.

"You came out here to save her, did you?"

"Because I was worried."

Wayne started swearing and he punched the wall with the side of his fist. The violence, the first ever to touch the shack, shook the walls and made Sam flinch. He carried on swearing and hollering and the night was so quiet that I was sure his vitriol was carried on the breeze all the way to town. He was a man that had been supremely changed from before; gone was the pretense of class and control. He was a raving maniac hurling hateful invective at Abe, at Sam, and at his dead father too. He hated everyone.

"All I wanted was what was mine - what was fair. You know? Is it too much to ask for your father to respect you? Is it? And for your daughter to love you? What did I do that was so wrong? So what if I didn't want to do things the way he did them. So what! He accuses me of being greedy. Me! He's got everything under the sun but I'm the greedy one. Do you know what that's like? Do you? To know that your

father thinks that of you and that your own daughter - only daughter - agrees with him. And then they hatch this plan."

"You got the money, Wayne." Abe said.

Sam and I looked at my brother and he sighed.

"Look," he said, "I'll tell you now. This isn't the way I wanted you to find out, Sam, but it'll have to do."

She stood up and was facing him, eyes fixed.

"I made arrangements with your father and Amish Mike - before the fight - that, if I won, he would get most of the money. A little would go to Joel and I'm happy we did that. In exchange, he dropped the lawsuits against the property and agreed to a kind of pre-nup...in advance of the will...to not challenge anything, to let it all go. That's what we did, Sam. It's all done."

She said, "You own the property."

"No. You do. It's all in your name. It's all done."

Their eyes were locked.

"So, what do you get?"

"Yeah, Abe," Wayne added, "what's in it for you? What back room deal did my father make with you?"

Abe's face tightened and he leaned back against the door, sighed again and crossed his arms. We stood there, Wayne with his gun at his side, Sam with a look of complete bewilderment, but wearing a faint smile, and me just as perplexed, clueless and expectant as they were. I'd never seen him like this. He looked strange. He looked emotional.

"Sam, Sam...it's all for you. This has all been for you. The whole thing...the fight. Since I first saw you back in Bernard's office in Atlanta I've had no other thought. The minute you walked in and were more beautiful in person

than even that picture on the office wall and I saw how you were with him - with Bernard - and you were smiling at him and kidding with him. I'd never seen a woman so beautiful. I'd never heard a woman laugh and had her laugh make me happy. You walked and you moved like it was all a dance and I watched you and you smiled and I fell in love. It's that simple...if you can believe it. My whole life had been about discipline and the battles I needed to fight until you came in, walked around the table and simply said hello."

"You're telling me that you planned all this to win her?" Wayne asked.

"No," Abe replied quietly. "I had no plan. There are no plans for this sort of thing. Who can make a plan for what's just happened? All I did was follow you, Sam. I had no plans. I didn't care about fighting Joel Arthur one way or another. Or for the money. I simply followed you here. The rest was opportunity. You walked in and everything changed. And I knew that I was taking a terrible chance with a fight like this but there was that small voice, which I've never doubted in my life, that told me it was a bigger chance to let you walk away. A woman like you isn't walking into the room very often. And that's how I spotted you so quickly - that's my greatest skill, I think: I can spot things, I know what I'm looking at."

"I was only there for a minute or two."

"So? That was all I needed to see. When you see someone so genuine and full of love's boundless energy, and you recognize it, it's like nothing else. I saw you with Bernard. He loved you - he respected you! That man didn't respect too many people. And the way you two were - the

way you smiled at each other, the humor you shared. I saw it. I understood it. I recognized you immediately because I'd been looking for you my whole life."

"So, you just followed me here? That was your plan?"

"There was no plan. I didn't know what I was doing from moment to moment. I just knew that you were going to be here and that was enough for me. Can you believe that? You see me as this man of iron, with a steely will, but that's not me. It's never been me. I've always followed my heart - like the day that I got Charlie's Custer back. That wasn't a planned thing. I had no plan whatsoever. I was walking down the street in a fury, full of indignation. I had no idea what I was gonna do - only that what I was doing was completely and totally right. That's all that's ever mattered to me: doing the right thing right now. And that's what I did when I followed you here. I had no idea; there was no plan. I saw you and the seeing did something I can't explain."

"You gave away all that money...for me?"

He was shaking his head and his eyes were zeroed in on hers and he stepped to her. A few feet separated them. "No. I didn't give it away. I spent it. I spent it on buying what I wanted more than anything else in the world...which was to see you happy and make sure you had this...all of this...always and there was no fight in it for you.

"And you can just take it, Sam. You don't have to love me. You don't have to like me. I did it because it was in my heart to do it and it's yours without any stipulations. But, please know," he took another half step toward her and was looking down at her, directly into her eyes, "that it's because I love you that I've done it. Bernard had no idea.

He was never a part of it. I thought of making the deal with your father that day on the deck after I heard the whole thing out and understood what was at stake. So, it's yours. This little place is yours and no one can touch it. This isn't the way that I wanted to tell you - and I certainly didn't mean to come out here uninvited. I'm sorry that it happened this way. But, please know, that it's all been simply because I adore you and want nothing more than to make you happy and...and...to be with you. This place I give you with the money I earned with these," he held up his fists. Then he put his hand over his chest. "But my heart and my love I can only offer you if you'll have them and if you will...sweet Sam...if you will, then I'll be yours and there will never be another. And I'd never fight again unless it was to protect you because there would be nothing higher to ever gain by fighting than your love and I would already have that.

"So, you have all this and you have me too if you want. I ask in return all of you or nothing. I don't go halfway, don't love halfway, and won't be loved like that either. So if you love me like this, with your whole heart, if you are that brave, and dare to be loved as much as I love you, then say so. If not..." he drew a long, hard breath, "...then I'll leave you to your place and I'll go."

She threw herself at him with a great and sudden force, as though some invisible power that had been holding her back was now removed. She had her head on his muscled chest, which was still wet with the salty Gulf water. I stood there transfixed. They embraced one another with a great fervency and they kissed as though they were afraid of the

moment slipping away. His hands roamed her head, her neck and her back, never settling, searching around, taking in as much as they could of a moment he seemed to fear wasn't real. Yes, his hands gripped her in the strength of a hope realized, of a dream suddenly appearing in the flesh - now to be held and caressed. And it was all logical in its strange way while at the same time unfathomable just an hour ago. I'd heard Abe's voice, saw his face as he spoke, and still couldn't believe the words he'd said. Indeed, it made sense and it made no sense. He loved her. He loved her.

I guess I hadn't considered that possibility until now.

He had her face in his hands and he said, "I thought you hated me."

"No," she replied through tears of euphoria, "I was never happier than that night when you held me in Tampa. It was a moment of violence but I was in your arms and right then I knew that there was nothing more perfect in life than being held by you. You weren't a man of anger or violence; you were a man of love. I saw it and knew it and fell completely in love with you but never thought that you'd love me. I thought it was so impossible and I was mad at you for going away after the fight. I wanted you to stay. I wanted to hear you say that you didn't want to leave here. I wanted you to say that you wanted to stay with me...just with me.

"And I was never more scared than when I thought Joel was going to hurt you. Even when those men had me on the ground that night - I was more afraid for you earlier that day than I was for myself right then. I didn't know why at

first but I realized at that moment that I was really in love with you but I tried to deny it. I couldn't bear the thought of losing Tuck, this place, and you. I kept having these images in my head of driving back to North Carolina so, so alone and never again meeting another man that could come close to you. And that was certain - not the aloneness, but the fact that there wasn't going to be another man like you."

"Ah," Wayne interrupted, "I have a gun over here."

That stopped their love affair in its tracks, which was fine with me because it was painful and weird to watch. We all looked at Wayne and waited.

"You can say all you want about not having a plan but, you must admit, this has all worked out quite beautifully for you. Wouldn't you agree? But for me...well, that's a different story..."

"You have all the money," Sam said.

"Ah, and what money is that? I take about half of it after taxes..."

"You're a Democrat," Abe said with a sarcastic smile, "don't complain."

"You're hilarious."

Abe shrugged and smiled at us despite Wayne's glare.

"And did you know that Pamela filed for divorce? Did you know that?"

Sam opened her mouth to say something. Not a sound came forth.

"She springs it on me when we got back to Orlando and she's all professional about it. Like it was nothing personal. I've had more emotion in the courtroom talking to defense

attorneys and judges. That's how bad it was. Almost thirty years of marriage...and she treats it like it was a house sale."

"You were cheating on her," I said. "You had a mistress on your boat when you guys were here."

He started yelling at me and waving the gun around as he gestured with his hands.

"That was nothing! She was mad that I hired the same girl for the crew. She didn't like her...kept accusing me of being in love with her." He kept ranting about the crew-girl and, evidently, about others long before, that his wife believed he was involved with. He was as innocent as a saint, though - or so he persisted. He went on, "I mean, what's a man gonna do...a man like me. I like people. I talk with people all the time. She knew that when we got married. I have lots of friends. Lots of them. So what if some are women. Does that mean that I'm sleeping with every woman I'm friends with? Am I flirting with everyone I talk to?"

"And so she kicks me out of our own house. Good thing I had some money in another account when this happened cause she took all the money from the joint accounts. She said I can keep the boat and the slut on it. Can you believe that?"

"This just happen?"

"Absolutely. Then I got in the car and drove here. When I got here I saw the lights on so I took a boat from the town dock and rowed out. Not that I'm wanted here either. I mean, I get a phone call from Mike to tell me that my father

died. He calls me and says that and then hangs up. What the hell? Who does that?"

"Don't whine, Dad. You got exactly what you wanted - the money. So stop griping about it."

"You hear this? See? See how she talks to me? I'm out here baring my soul...my wife, her mother, has just kicked me out of the house, my father died..."

"You're waving a gun around," Abe said.

"Oh. This? This? C'mon. You're not afraid of little ole me, are you? I'm kicked out of my house and I've got nowhere to go, so I get in my car and drive out here. I don't go to my boat because it's over past Tampa. I'm not going anywhere near that mess. But the whole country's going to hell out there and I have a gun to protect myself. What's the big deal?"

"Then put it away."

Wayne stared at him with angry, crazed eyes and I couldn't discern what he was thinking. He tapped his foot and looked down at the gun.

"Put it away," Abe repeated.

He started to bring it back up again but Abe had had enough, burst forward the few feet between them and grabbed Wayne's right wrist with his left hand, pulling it downward toward the floor. Immediately as he did this he fired a short, deathly quick shovel hook to the midsection with his right. It hit poor Wayne in his soft midsection. He wasn't a trained fighter, his body wasn't steeled to withstand such blows and it was evident that it was excessive force, though Abe didn't hit him as hard as he could. Wayne let out a painful gasp and dropped instantly to

his knees. Just like that Abe was holding the gun. He stepped back with it, ejected the magazine, then the bullet in the chamber. He did this with calm efficiency and handed them to me. I was wearing cargo shorts and he motioned at the pockets - which he didn't have in his shorts. I put them in one of my side pockets.

Just as I did, Wayne jumped to his feet, snarling, furious, devoid of his sanity and launched himself at Abe. I grabbed Sam and we retreated to the corner as Wayne threw a barrage of blows - desperate and hateful - a violent tantrum aimed at Abe physically but, more to the point, lashing out at inner demons we couldn't see. Abe sidestepped a charge, then another but there was so little room and lions and baskets and record players cluttered the floor making it impossible to move freely. So, after Wayne missed with another wild haymaker - and everything had missed up until that point - Abe grabbed him and pulled him into a clinch. I would say that they struggled but it was the struggle of a parent seizing hold of a toddler, not of two equals fighting it out. Abe had a hand behind Wayne's head and with his other hand he pinned the older man's elbow back against his body. Wayne struggled but in pathetic, almost comedic futility. Abe was too strong, too skilled, and there was no way to get free. Wayne swung wildly with his free hand but it could only land with a wimpish, childish smack against Abe's back since Abe was in full control of both his head and center of gravity.

Abe had Wayne's head under control. Being taller anyway, combined with the way he had his head pulled down, his face was near Wayne's ear. "Stop," he said like a

father trying to calm down a raging child. "Stop. I'm not gonna hurt you. Stop."

Wayne kept struggling, grunting, and trying vainly to free himself.

"Stop fighting. You aren't fighting me...you just think you are. You're fighting you. You hate yourself. But just stop. No one here wants to hurt you - or will hurt you."

Then, suddenly, I noticed that Wayne wasn't grunting in effort or frustration anymore - he was crying, sobbing. He gave up completely and went limp with grief. Abe looked over at Sam and I saw great pity in his eyes. Sam was probably more shocked than I was.

This was the way the night ended: Wayne holding onto my brother, weeping, clutching him as though Abe were a lifeline and he was lost in the dark sea outside. I'm not sure what it was I was watching. Abe seemed to know, judging by the look on his face and the compassion that he showed a man he would have been justified in hating. My head was spinning from the rapid changes in direction the night had already taken. Abe loved her and she obviously adored him. And there was this whole business with the gun and Wayne's rage and yet there he was crying like a man that had lost his mind. Sam joined them and they were standing there in a bizarre group hug. Finally, it was just Wayne hugging Sam. His tears subsided enough for him to look at her and focus. There was a lifetime of regret in his eyes but he couldn't bring himself to say he was sorry. He was sorry for himself - sorry for his shame and lack of honor. I wondered if this was the end that all such men come to - if

this was an inexorable form of justice lurking quietly in the shadows of morality that mortal men couldn't see.

When he stepped back and started to pull himself together, wiping at his nose and eyes with his hand, he said, "Dad loved you."

Sam nodded but knew she couldn't say the same thing back to him and have it mean the same thing, so she stood there in silence.

To Abe he said, "He always wanted a son that he was proud of...my father. He was never proud of me. I was never like him - or like you. You were what he wanted as a son. You were what he admired as a man. Not me." He shook his head and looked around the messy room, things knocked about from the scuffle.

"I love you, Dad."

He shook his head. His eyes were faded, depressed and lifeless. He looked as depressed and defeated as any man I'd ever seen. He seemed caught in another clinch - greater and stronger than Abe's - and he knew all was hopeless. Joel Arthur never looked like this. His eyes, despite the singular beating he endured, were still full of the pride that comes from having taken your shot in the discipline you loved and accepting what comes - win or lose.

"Maybe," he replied. "But you don't respect me."

There was nothing to say to this. He was right. And that's when it dawned on me that Bernard's whole fight idea was all about this very thing I had in front of me. Wayne hadn't lived for honor; he'd lived for ambition and gain. Bernard, Abe, and Joel lived for honor - win, lose, or draw; they lived through the old codes that Wayne mocked as inefficient and

archaic. But in the end this is what I saw. Wayne saw living by Bernard's code as a form of moral slavery but it's really freedom. Wayne never got that but on this night he was beginning to see it, though it was too late for him to turn back. His father had tried to teach him of the need a man has in life to be willing to suffer for his goals - whether they be art, sport or business - and he'd rejected that code. Yeah, I got it, I think. That's what Bernard was trying to tell me; that's what it was about to him.

I looked at Sam standing there in that awkward silence. Bernard had loved about her that she loved photography, music, and this place and she loved them all for their own sake rather than for what she could get out of them. That was the root of her simplicity and it's the root of all that's good in any of us. It's the desire to serve, in love, in adulation and gratitude, the things that are true and beautiful and excellent in this world. In her, Bernard saw a wondrous, brilliant perfection of heart that was without guile and wasn't contriving ways to use those things she loved but to be used by them. In this way she was the antithesis of her father; she was an artist, he was a consumer. Bernard had seen all this and somehow also saw that a fight between Abe and Joel Arthur would accentuate the whole of it.

I caught myself shaking my head at the wonder and wisdom of it all. Wayne saw it too. He knew that without respect there wasn't going to be love and that love wasn't really what this world was trying to sell us these days - a nebulous, value-free *thing* that somehow happens to us. No, like the skill in Abe's fists, to love and to give love - real

love...love with honor - requires character and sacrifice. We were standing there and they looked at me when I shook my head and I think that we all knew the same truth. It was there for us to see in light of what Bernard had done, who he'd been, and all that had transpired between us.

Wayne nodded and looked for a moment sadder than I thought possible but then seemed to snap out of it and he shook Abe's hand, then mine, and then hugged Sam. That was his goodbye. He left without saying another word.

CHAPTER 22

A WEEK PASSED and I lived in the voluminous shadow of my brother and Sam's love affair. It was like a large and bright sun shining down upon a tepid, lonely plant devoid of care and water. The heat of it was so enormous that there was little I could do to stay cool; I was burning up in it wherever I went in the house or out around town. I watched the shack from the gazebo and sometimes could almost imagine that I could hear their voices, their laughter, their consummate joy and then I would feel even more parched and barren.

When I told them I was leaving they didn't take it well. The cities were still unstable and the economy was more wobbly than if Abe had pulverized it with a combination. The TV news shows were breathless over the devastation that had first come - weeks ago - in a full and complete surprise, which no one had known would cause the resulting chaos. Nevertheless, it was as Bernard called it: the catastrophe was rolling over our land and giving lie to our presumptions of economic might. I watched the reports and got the feeling they were talking about the demise of a

once great champion that was no longer what he was but no one had had the heart to see it. America's fall looked like Tyson groping around on the canvas, looking for his mouthpiece, devoid of his senses, and everyone was asking, "Buster who?" The end had come from the basics. Tyson had stopped moving his head and working the jab on the way in; America had stopped pursuing productivity, forgotten that it was even important, and had focused on consumption as if that was ever a way to lasting wealth. Well, at least that's what I was getting out of it all.

I told them that it was all okay and that I truly wished them the best. I did mean that last part. To deny my anguish over the loss of Sam was easy because I truly didn't think I was lying to them. What would telling them the full truth accomplish anyway? It would alter nothing save for placing a nice guilt trip on their new love. That would do nothing for anyone involved so I flat out denied that I was more than "just a little sad" over my loss. Of course, Sam wasn't mine to begin with so it's all irrelevant in the extreme. I was irrelevant. They had each other and they didn't need me moping around feeling miserably sorry for my pitiful self.

Nevertheless, when I told them of my plan to head back to Asheville and "check on things," Abe was anything but supportive, yet he knew that a man couldn't live like I was living and that I had to step out of his shadow. He saw it in me as sure as he'd see an opponent fading down the stretch; he knew when a man was finished and, in this case, as far as life on the Key went, I was finished.

"It's not safe," he said.

"I'll be careful."

What else does a man say in such a place? I saw Tampa. I lived through it. Yes, he saved me but I fought and, frankly, I was ready to fight better next time - if, in fact, there was a next time. I told him that I'd avoid the cities - would skirt Atlanta - and would be fine. What could he say? There was a strange thing in the way he looked at me as we stood there on the gazebo. I hadn't expected it and, therefore, couldn't make sense of it when I saw it. Later, though, it dawned on me that what I saw was a letting go. We had at last come to a place in our lives where staying together wasn't workable and that was because of me; I had to step up and be my own man. He'd always been his own man; now it was my turn. I'd never thought of the day, never given the notion any thought whatsoever but I saw in the way he looked at me that he had figured it would come eventually just as all departures must occur here under the sun. Everyone says goodbye. So he saw it for what it was and there was a regret in his eyes that I hadn't expected and, in retrospect, it made me pity him a little. He'd given his all to protect me for all those years and then suddenly, so swiftly, life changed course, and our happiness was no longer mutual but at odds. There was no way to deny it. He saw it for what it was just as he always saw things for what they were. It wasn't fair for me to deny him his right to love. Also, it wasn't fair for him to deny me my right to go find my own way.

I started my trip early on a Wednesday morning. After we made the decision that I would go, Sam suggested I take one of Bernard's cars. That wasn't even a slightly tempting idea for me. I wanted a truck. Asheville was over five hundred miles away. If I drove Abe's Ram I would probably

make it a little over four hundred before I needed gas. Well, gas was pretty hard to come by at that point. Delivery was spotty and I didn't want to risk running out in some God forsaken place along a highway. We called around and found a dealership down off of Highway 19 that was practically giving cars away. Since the trouble started they hadn't sold a single car. Bernard had left Sam a boatload of gold and silver coins and she insisted that I take some of the silver. Well, suddenly a little silver went quite a long way and I ended up buying a brand new Tundra and drove it off the lot.

Sam joked that Bernard wouldn't have been happy to see his silver used to buy a Japanese truck.

Nevertheless, I drove off from the house, watching them from the rear-view mirror standing there in the morning humidity like husband and wife - like my mother and father - and I was leaving home. Sam cried and her outpouring of emotion made me cry too. "You don't have to go, Charlie. Please be safe...please come back soon...as soon as you can." I didn't mean to be but found myself glad that she was upset and, in fact, reveled in it. It was a hollow revenge to break her heart even a little bit, which is something I'm ashamed to admit but I was crying as she hugged and kissed me - more for myself than for her. There was anger in the passion that I hugged her with. Likewise, there was resentment and embarrassment in the firmness of my grip when I shook hands with Abe. He was surprised by the vigor, looked at me with eyes that were almost pleading me not to go but he was too strong to beg, and too strong to succumb to what would only, in the end, hurt me. In my

immaturity, I was happy to be hurting him. When he hugged me, I was stunned.

"I'm sorry I hurt you," he said with a hand on my shoulder, squinting in the fierce sunlight. "Do you remember when I'd bring you to Schenectady with me when I was boxing? Do you? And I'd drop you off at Mrs. Redmond's house over near the park?"

"Yeah."

"She'd wave at me from the porch when you got out and she was always holding a book she was reading with you."

"She taught me the classics," I nodded and remembered.

"I always thought that I was boxing for that. She taught you because she liked you and saw your potential...and she felt sorry for us, I guess. I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for us. I hated that we were alone like we were. You read and learned and I fought. I'm done fighting, Charlie...go and write."

I could see it in his eyes: he shouldn't have fought for me for so long. He knew this was a trip and a time that was overdue.

I turned the corner and they were gone. I wiped at stray tears and breathed in the new truck smell and fought the urge to open the windows so I could keep it as long as I could. The way things were looking, there may not be many more new truck purchases in my future - not in anyone's future.

The highway leading out of town was desolate and the lone gas station that was open still had some gas. I stopped

and topped the tank off just to be safe. When I went in to pay, the owner said he hadn't had but a few people a day stop by for gas and he was sure that everyone in town was topped off. No one wanted to leave and we were too far for people to try and find gas or cause trouble. He wanted to talk about things but when I told him I had a long trip in front of me he was incredulous.

"You're leaving? Are you crazy? Where to?"

"North Carolina. That's where I'm from."

He shook his head dismally. "You aren't thinking straight, kid. You seen the news? Things are all screwed up. This is the best place that God could have put you. Ain't no one coming out here to screw with us and we're doing okay. There's still gas and groceries. No telling what you might run into up there. You're better waiting things out for a little while."

"Yeah. I know. Thanks for the advice. I've already heard it all."

When I pulled back onto the highway I saw him shaking his head like an old man does when a young man is, well, young. The V8 roared as I gave it gas and I watched the town grow small in the mirror. It's funny how sometimes you can't wait to get away from a place full of dreams. The sky was clear and blue and the water on either side of me seemed endless and full of melancholy. Inside me there was a storm of emotions churning and twisting. I drove faster to try and outpace my doubts as if they were running up along side the green truck. When I saw the pie and antique place I stopped in the middle of the road and sat there idling for a minute, looking at it, drumming my fingers on the new

wheel, lost in thought, memories and regret assaulting me. I pulled in and parked. The pie lady, Hope, walked out to the porch just as I stepped out.

"It's good to see you," I said. She still looked the same - hair shooting off in divers directions in tangled masses, eyes big and penetrating, fatty arms bulging out from her sleeveless shirt and apron. "Thought I'd check in on you and say hello before I left."

"Where you going?"

"Back home."

"You sure?"

"Well, I think it'll be okay. I should be in long before dark. I've got some extra gas in a can in the bed."

"I meant are you sure you're going home?"

I stared at her in speechless bewilderment.

"That brother of yours ain't going with you?"

"He's staying. He's staying with Sam."

"Sit down," she said, pointing at the wooden rocking chair beside her as she turned to walk back inside. I complied because, well, she had an authority about her that one did not doubt. Plus, and more to the point, she had wisdom and a love that made me suddenly feel ashamed for being cruel to Sam and Abe. There was a sigh in her expression before she went inside that exposed the grudge I was holding as being small, petty, and dishonorable.

She came back out with a plate of cookies and a glass of juice. The cookies I put in my lap and the juice went on the window sill beside me.

"Looks like you could use some cookies."

"The world seems like it could use some cookies," I replied and started eating one.

She sat in the chair next to me and searched me with those big, dark eyes, the whites all clean and clear. She appeared to be rather untroubled by everything that was happening.

"Thanks. These are great. Everything been okay for you?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"You watching the news?"

"I know all about that stuff. Every man and woman that's stopped here in the last few weeks has been yammering on about it. That Joel fella and his pretty wife stopped a week ago and asked the same thing."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Son, the sooner you cease to worry about what you can't control, the better you'll find life is."

"Good point."

"That's the point of everything in there." She motioned to the antiques inside. "There's ultimately nothing in this life that we have control over except for who we are. All that stuff in there was stuff that people worked for, stressed for, coveted for."

"Thought you said it was memories."

"It is. And now the whole country has em. The whole point, though, is that you gotta learn that it's those things inside you - the things that the antiques remind you of - that you have to honor and hold on to. A walk through an antique store is a walk through a cemetery. Both of those

things ought to humble a person and set them right. The trick is to keep that rightness everywhere you go.”

“Oh.”

“So you going home?”

“Yeah,” I said faintly.

She was looking at me with sympathy and compassion, like she could see for herself the pains in my heart, the aloneness...the embarrassment.

“Samantha’s a gem,” she said.

I nodded my head but didn’t look at her and yet felt her penetrating eyes upon me.

“There’s not a dishonest bone in that girl’s body,” she went on, changing her gaze from me to the water across the highway as she started rocking gently, the legs making a sort of scrunching sound on the porch floor like they were grinding under her weight. “Nor in that brother of yours.”

“I agree.”

“It’s okay to be heartbroken, Charlie.”

I kept looking down at the plate and chewing slowly.

“Being heartbroken is one of the sweetest things in the world if you know how to handle it. Some of us are given the privilege in life of feeling that pain and knowing that love that pierces a heart so deep that ya feel you have to run someplace else. It’s a privilege that God gives, Charlie. It means that you haven’t lost. Bitterness means you’ve lost.”

I kept my eyes down on the plate and then at the floor when she called me.

“Charlie,” she put a hand on my arm and I looked into her soft, warm eyes, “you should know that you don’t lose

because you sitting here talking to me. You lose when you stuff the pain down and try and deny it and cover it with other stuff. But to feel the pain and still fight to have hope even in loneliness - that's strength."

"You gonna tell me that there's another girl out there for me?"

"Nope. Not gonna say any such thing. Only The Lord knows stuff like that and a man or woman ought to just shut up about the future. Only thing I've got to say about it is that our Lord was a man of sorrows. This world tried to tell everyone that they should always get what they want. That kind of teaching makes a person lazy. Plus, if you sitting around expecting to be happy, you won't take no chances. A good life can't be either lazy or fearful, Charlie. A person's gotta have hope. But playing so you can't lose isn't hope - that's deceit. Failure doesn't mean defeat. The Lord don't settle accounts always on this earth. So what might look like a failure isn't always."

I drove the many miles home without incident. There were scarcely any other cars on the highways but those that were tried to stay clear of me, and I of them, making the trip feel nomadic, eerie and ever more lonesome. There were gas stations with convenience stores still open all along the route but they only had a few pumps working and rather limited inventory. Nevertheless, somewhere in the middle of Georgia, still a few hours south of Atlanta, I topped off again and got some fast food that was ridiculously expensive.

Our house was on the outskirts of the city, up in a small community on a hill looking back across downtown and back up to the hazy blue mountains that loomed tranquilly in the distance. Those graceful mountains that ringed Asheville all flowed into one another like the waves that lapped upon the Florida shores - except they never disappeared. Thankfully, nothing had happened to the house in our absence. The power was still on and there was no sign of vandalism or mayhem. Everyone's fear and trembling had been, at least for now, unfounded. I survived the journey and the house hadn't been destroyed by looters.

I walked outside and looked down at the distant city stretching out in the fading day. A resilient sun shone from behind white clouds as it sunk in the sky, sending rays shooting through a small gap and painting parts of the cloudy cover a brilliant gold. There was no sunset that could rival those on the Gulf and yet there was no scene equal to Asheville sitting in the splendorous lap of those soft, evanescent mountains either. When I was on the water I could wonder if anything could be comparable; now I was in the mountains again and I wondered the same. Beauty has its ways - diverse, quiet, always causing me to ache deeply in wonder at it. So, I stood there looking west at a sun that was slipping down past the horizon and I thought of how all these mountains were my shelter if I'd let them be. And it began to dawn on me that what the crazy Pie-Lady was saying was probably true.

All fighters have to know their weakness or they're no good. Lennox Lewis stayed a champion because he knew

that he didn't have an iron chin. A lesser man would never have had the courage to face it - to see the limitation, accept it, not allow it to drain him of confidence, and then fight in a way that protected his weakness. My weakness was that want of beauty and romance. She was telling me not to grow bitter and also to accept the sweet sting of rejection. Those that loved most must naturally be prone to sufferings of the soul since this was both a world of sunsets and of storms. One cannot suppose to be so moved by beauty that they aren't also crushed by life's ugliness too. I felt a wind come across the valley, sweeping down from sweet, majestic peaks afar, carrying hints of autumn on a warm evening, caressing me as I stood there. And I watched the trees that stretched up to the fading blue heavens, towering all around and above me, a great contrast to Florida's little trees. There was diversity even up there - some leaves swung and whirled in the wind while others bounced gently - all from the same cause.

So I steeled myself while standing there on the sloping lawn, which was a seat for nature's great show of purple clouds, full and mighty, aloft over gentle, yet awesome heights that ringed Asheville. Her lights were coming on as the mountains faded into blackness. It was all perfect. I had my city and mountains. I had a refuge. They could have the water and those sunsets. They could have each other. I would stay here amongst the sweeping hills and grieve - sweetly grieve, knowing that I've lost, knowing that I'm alone, but not giving up and not rushing; certainly not rushing. Like Lennox with that chin, the hopeless romantic needs to be careful because the very great desire for the

exquisite and the true and the beautiful could lead to rushing things. No...just be patient up here, I told myself. The Pie-Lady was right. Like Abe in his fight with Joel, sometimes doing nothing for a while is the right thing - it's being patient because recklessness will lead to the heartbreak that will turn to despair that will yield bitterness.

Before winter had come I had traveled a thousand miles of roads and wound all around the splendid paths of western North Carolina. There is a weirdness in the exertions of a rambler, of a man or woman that bumbles about, seeking whatever beauty or experience of art that will have them, and it lies in the very fact that when such perfections are found, they break us down. Wherever I went and found the moments of repose that quieted me, lifted me, and inspired me - like up in Hot Springs looking out from a high perch on a rock, down at the French Broad as it ambled around a wooded corner, heading somewhere I couldn't see - there was both heartbreak and glory. Infinity was written somewhere deep in the heart of us all and there was never more certainty of this elemental human fact than when I was sitting alone amongst the rolling mountains, or the wandering rivers, or the tumbling, crashing high waterfalls. To all of it there was always a surprise. I was wandering around, heartbroken and oddly enjoying it. It was a season of life where I wasn't worried about anything, trying to be or do anything; I was simply thinking.

This was, of course, a rather strange thing to be doing when the rest of the country was going through horrendous struggles. I went to the store and bought what I needed - which was never much because I ate little, drank mostly water and, when it was cold, lots of hot chocolate. For people that were worried about such things and had lost their jobs and had kids to feed, this was undeniably a tragic time. There was nothing I could do about any of that, though. I got my job back at the used book store in town, where there were rows and rows of worn paperbacks on shelves just as aged. The good news about the economic catastrophe was that there was no more trouble finding a parking spot in the city.

You have to find the positives where and when you can.

The book store was always busy with customers that looked less like shoppers than they did stray animals - all weathered and disorientated. They walked the aisles, browsed for hours, and sat in our old chairs and thumbed through various volumes of long ago but rarely bought anything. My boss, an old gentleman that was even skinnier than Bernard had been, never seemed to mind. You could tell he knew his little unimpressive place was now a virtual paradise in the new world order. His books and their cheapness were a lifeline to all those that went from being surrounded by all of the world's goods one month, and unable to afford gas the next.

Naturally, this led to quite a bit of difficulty. Though he was a nice old guy, he didn't talk much. He was a book fellow and was far more at home when buried in the pages of some author or another than he was in talking to living

souls. He generally communicated with me through well timed nods that indicated if something needed to be done, a customer needed help, or just to say hello. Being hearing impaired with a boss that never spoke was a pretty cool gig if you ask me. Well, in the last few weeks of October he came to me and began mumbling something about the money being tight. He spoke in awkward spurts and in a low voice so I had trouble following him.

"You can't pay me?"

"Mm-mmmm," he shook his head in evident shame. "I'm sorry."

"Well, I don't even know why you hired me back. I could tell that the money was tight."

He mumbled again - something about getting along with me. "We work well together," he said. "I like having you around. I like the way you handle the books...and look at them. You understand."

"Oh."

I went on to discover that he hadn't been able to make a rent payment for the last two months. This gave me an idea and I called Abe and convinced him to back me in making an offer on the building.

"You wanna own a bookstore?" He asked over the phone.

"Why not? The owners want out. Anyway...you'd own it."

"I'm not interested in a bookstore."

"You're interested in property, though. This is a good time to buy. Everyone's selling."

He laughed and said I had obviously learned from Bernard. I suppose there was some truth to that because

such a thing would never have occurred to me before I met him.

Well, Abe did buy it. He had Amish Mike handle the specifics and it was all settled in a matter of weeks. The tremendous surprise in the whole thing was that Abe set it up so that I was co-owner with him. When I told my boss that he didn't have to worry about making rent anymore because I now owned the building, he squinted at me as though he hadn't been able to make out what I said, so I repeated it.

"So, you own the building?"

"Right."

"Who owns the bookstore?"

"You do."

"But I can't pay the rent."

"Don't worry about it. I didn't pay for the building."

For some reason this was all he needed to hear. He shrugged, nodded his head as if it made perfect sense, smiled his little nervous, half-smile and went back to work. We didn't talk about it at all thereafter.

A few weeks later, on a blustery late November day, all gray and with a cold mountain wind blowing, chilling you to the bone, I sat in one of the soft, old arm chairs in the bookstore and was petting the house-cat, Larry, who was laying lazily on the arm of the chair. Business had been fairly brisk believe it or not and I was taking a short break from stocking, cleaning and working the register. It seemed that the longer the crash went on, the more people needed the comfort of the old words on worn, yellowed pages. Well,

I was sitting there reading a paperback, when a customer came up and asked me if I worked there.

I looked up and said I did. I'd seen her before. She'd been in several times in the past weeks, browsing around, and every now and then we'd catch each other's eye and then nervously go back to doing whatever it was we were doing. Her brown hair was long and straight, flowing down over her shoulders, framing her cute, sweet face that was smiling innocently at me. She had her hands clasped in front of her and wore an endearing look of both uncertainty and hopefulness.

"Well, I guess I meant are you working *now*?" She added.

I started to say that I owned the place but stopped. "Do you need something?"

"No...no...I was just wondering. I see you in here all the time."

"I have the best job in the world."

"It's great that you have one."

We smiled at each other in that sweet, innocent and awkward way that unveils a heart full of hope - that's reaching out carefully, stretching forth in a world of uncertainties.

"I'm Charlie."

"Julie."

Still sitting, I reached out my hand to shake hers but when hers touched mine, we didn't shake - we touched hesitantly at the fingers and then I squeezed them gently, looking up at her warm, brown eyes. They were different than Sam's. Julie's eyes were like those of a little girl

looking out at a world that scared her and that she had reason, indeed, to fear. They seemed to be seeing me as someone to trust, someone she was looking for, so it wasn't as if the fear I saw in her was crippling. Perhaps it was better to call it caution rather than fear. Changes were everywhere. You could see that in everyone's eyes when you passed on the blustery streets. People were shocked. Gone was the frivolous and vacuous confidence that had suffused the American soul; all of that had slipped beyond our feeble grasp. We had all had the unbridled and unwarranted confidence of an undefeated fighter that had never faced real crisis, real challenge - much less defeat. We had grown up expecting not just peace, but affluence - even opulence. Now we were humbled. Now we had the look of the stricken fighter, newly risen to his feet after his great fall, and we saw the world anew - we saw it as the vulnerable saw it.

But my Julie looked at me with eyes that were measured against all of this. Many will say they don't care about things - that all they want is love. I haven't encountered many that have truly meant that, and you could see this in the subdued look of panic across the countless gray faces that were passing, wandering, and worrying all around the city. Julie showed none of that panic. She simply looked at me with a reserve and yet with a yearning that showed me she was comfortable in the new America.

"Listen," I said and stood up, "I've got a break due. Would you like to go around the corner for a coffee or something?"

She smiled before she responded, and her smile made her face come alive with innocent delight. "Sure," she said simply, her word much more contained than her smile.

I grabbed my coat and knit cap and we went out together. My boss smiled at me warmly as we walked by the counter. When we turned down a corner to cut across to the next street instead of going all the way up the block, and walked between the cold concrete buildings, we passed a nearly empty parking lot. Two men were leaning against the front of an old Camry, its green paint worn down so bad that it looked like it was smeared.

I saw them, saw their eyes, and didn't see that look of burden and melancholy that others wore. They looked at us with what others might consider furtiveness, but I knew better now. They were predators, not victims.

They started to get up and come toward us and I think they would have separated - judging from their direction - one going in front of us and the other to our rear. I was wearing a long coat that I'd bought at an Army surplus store a few years back on a whim. I'd never worn it before since it was out of style yet it seemed perfect for the new times. Well, I reached into the coat pocket and pulled out the Glock that Abe had insisted I take with me

It was loaded.

There was one in the chamber.

I held it at my side and kept my head down, watching them from the corner of my eye.

"I'm so happy this place is still open," I was saying to Julie, who couldn't see my gun but saw the two thugs and was trying not to look worried. "They have unbelievable

pastries," I continued. "If they close down, there's no reason to go on."

She chuckled nervously.

The thugs, of course, saw my weapon and were taken aback by both it and, I'm sure, by my strange demeanor. They stopped in their tracks and looked at each other, frozen, indecisive. My heart was pounding but I continued to joke with Julie as we walked. They stayed there and watched us. As we passed them and approached the road, I turned my head back and nodded slightly without making eye contact.

They didn't pursue us.

When we were around the corner and heading to the cafe, Julie said, "I thought those guys were gonna come after us."

"I can do this," I said softly, my words carried away by a swirling wind that brought a fresh chill to my face.

"What was that?"

I stopped her there on the street, dry leaves on the gray sidewalk being kicked up in the cranky wind, and I put a hand on her shoulder. "We're safe, you and me...it's all okay. We're safe."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason splits his time between teaching martial arts and writing. He's the author of several non-fiction titles and is a columnist for Wing Chun Illustrated. His novels focus on great themes - especially liberty, meaning, love - and, naturally, great warriors. To learn more about him and to read deeper insights into this and his other work, please visit:

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